University of Alberta

The Fuzzy Worlds of Underage Drinking

by

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For my mother,

Who taught me to write

And for my father

Who kept it in perspective

Abstract

A study of underage alcohol consumption was conducted through an analysis of empirical and conceptual studies available in the field. The focus of this project is on mapping and exploring the complexities of the phenomenon of underage drinking, while maintaining an emphasis upon the perspectives of adolescents themselves, and the personal and interpersonal dynamics at play. A synthesis of narrative vignettes and formalized academic analysis aims to provoke thought and insight, while deepening our understanding of common concepts, issues and ideas in this field of study. This entails a theoretical exploration of issues such as alcohol and its meanings, identity and development of the self, the context of adolescence, and the impact of peers and the nuclear family on underage drinking behaviour.

Preface

I came to this project gradually, you might say. Only several years removed from my own experiences of drinking underage, I can still vividly recall the excitement, the intensity, and unpredictability of those times, and how an evening, a friendship, or a person can change once alcohol is introduced into their social life. Moreover, I can recall how, even then, I was fascinated by the subject; amused, confused and captivated by the nature and character of drinking among my fellow adolescents. Indeed, I would frequently provoke the ire of my peers by asking probing questions, or wondering aloud about many of the very issues that are the focus of the present work. Mine was a social scene in which the introduction of alcohol was cataclysmic, fascinating, and deeply intriguing. Upon making my first forays into academic works on underage drinking, however, I was disappointed, then intrigued, by the stark contrast between these formal, social-scientific analyses and my own musings and memories. Those first quantitative accounts of survey data resonated hardly at all with my own experience, nor with what I perceived at first to be the most important elements to be pursued in my study of adolescents and alcohol. The challenge of my own project crystallized as I pondered this disconnect: I would endeavour to engage on a theoretical level with the insights of the literature, while making a determined effort to maintain a concurrent focus upon the immanent and experiential dimensions of underage drinking. Moreover, I would need to grapple with the complexity of understanding the phenomenon of adolescent alcohol use, as well as the difficulty inherent in academic descriptions of the texture of adolescent social life.

Before diving into the fruits of this labour, I feel that several additional introductory remarks are in order, to give the reader a better understanding of the nature of this project. First, I would like to comment briefly on terminology. A study in underage drinking suggests a broad focus upon the experiences with alcohol of anyone below the legal age of purchase and consumption. It is probably a weakness within the field of literature that the variety of developmental trajectories among youth is not adequately addressed by most studies, and so the use of categorical terms such as "adolescent", "youth", and "teenage" becomes somewhat problematic. Obviously, the body of individuals subsumed beneath the heading of "underage drinkers" is extremely diverse, and one could easily make analytical distinctions between pre- and post-pubescent subjects, teenagers and younger children, older and younger teens, or adolescents and children. Unfortunately, such distinctions within the literature are often inconsistent; whereas one study will focus on students of certain ages (e.g., Adalbjarnardottir & Hafsteinsson, 2001) or "in high school" (e.g., Williams & Ricciardelli, 1999), another may take into account detailed demographic information (e.g., Schulenberg, Maggs, Dielman, Leech, Kloska, Shope & Laetz, 1999), and still another may treat youth largely as an undifferentiated mass (e.g., MacDonald, 1989). Thus, although the present study tries not to lose sight of the immense diversity of youth and their drinking experiences, rigorous divisions between groups of young individuals cannot be sustained throughout. Therefore, terms such as "adolescent", "teen" and "youth," which appear throughout the text, should be understood where not specified as referring broadly to individuals below the legal drinking age in North America, be they 11 or 18. Please note, however, that young children (loosely defined as those who have

made no significant developmental progress beyond childhood) fall outside the scope of the present study, as I believe that their drinking is experienced and constructed in fundamentally different ways. Consider, for example, the conceptual difference between a seven year-old drinking tequila with a friend or family member and a fourteen year-old engaging in the same behaviour.

Basically, I am enforcing the popular, though ill-defined distinction between "children" and "adolescents" or "youth," maintaining a focus upon the latter group(s), so long as they fall beneath the legal age to consume alcohol. One reason for such a broad division is that the underage drinking experiences of youth cannot necessarily be defined according to strict age or developmental categories. Further, the inconsistency of such distinctions in the literature would confound a strong developmental focus. Generally speaking, however, this study deals with alcohol consumption through the teenage and adolescent years.

Next, I feel that I should speak to the normative orientation of the present work. Often, other studies in this field begin from a moral standpoint that assumes drinking among youth to be an unequivocal negative (e.g., Jaynes & Rugg, 1988, MacDonald, 1989); this behaviour may be constructed as a problem that is "alarming" (e.g., Williams & Ricciardelli, 1999) and needs redress. I am not at all interested in expressly demonizing the use of alcohol by youth, nor do I intend to prescribe specific strategies for predicting, identifying or treating what others may term "problem drinking" (e.g., Arata, Stafford & Tims, 2003). The perspective that focuses on the "harm" caused by underage consumption is, I feel, well represented within academic literature (e.g., Jaynes & Rugg, 1988, Palmqvist, Martikainen & von Wright, 2003; Schelenberg, Maggs, Dielman &

Leech, 1999; Williams & Ricciardelli, 1999), and does not bear reiteration within the present work. My intention, rather, is to abandon these limiting normative standpoints and the narrow lens of approaches that construct drinking as a problem, in order to explore avenues of thought and theory that are absent or neglected within the field to date. I intend neither to lament the pitfalls of this behaviour, nor valorize it as positive and glamorous, but instead to analyze the phenomenon itself independent of the imperative to make such political judgements.

Finally, I would like to comment briefly on the writing of this thesis. The reader will notice immediately that there are sections of the text that read like fiction. They are narrative, descriptive, and they employ literary styles and devices seldom found in sociological writing. Indeed, these scenes are semi-fictional in that some or all of the characters and situations therein have been altered, adapted, and/or crafted from my own lived experiences as a means to engage and to simulate experiences of underage drinking. The reasons for incorporating these sections into this academic project are multiple. Importantly, they permit the consideration and expression of different facets of the topic in such a way as to emphasize their interconnection and interdependence, while at the same time evoking the texture and immediacy of adolescents' subjective experiences of alcohol and drinking. These narrative pieces are not designed to echo or bolster the theoretical assertions that follow or precede them, nor to accurately recreate my own experiences, but rather as tools to engage the topic in a starkly different manner. Moreover, these sections are not to be viewed as empirical data in themselves, nor as mere illustrations of points drawn from the empirical studies under examination, but as another medium for synergy and analysis of ideas and their interconnections. In this, I

am guided by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, who astutely remark that "a story is not a neutral attempt to mirror the facts of one's life; it does not seek to recover already constituted meanings" (2000, 745). In contrast to styles of writing that seek only to report, or to make assertions with maximum certainty, "the narrative mode looks for particular connections between events…Explanation in the narrative mode is contextually embedded" (Richardson, 1997, 28). Indeed, the use of narrative within the present project draws inspiration from a larger academic tradition that seeks to produce insight through the narrative exploration of "*subjectivity*, meaning the human lived experience and the physical, political and historical context of that experience" (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). This approach, with its explicit focus upon "lived experience as interpretive" (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992), has tremendous integrative and expressive potential for the ideas with which I've been wrestling.

It is my hope that the interplay between formal academic discussion and narrative vignettes will provide fruitful contrast as each style informs the reading of the other. Readers are invited to consider the continuity, veracity and applicability of an academic discussion of underage alcohol consumption as they are confronted with the social world of teens themselves, albeit narrated by an outsider. The narrative elements are, of course, subject to similar comparative scrutiny: do they make sense when cast in relief by rigorous social-scientific research? Are there elements within the narratives that add to the formalized discussion? These are some of the questions that I hope readers are driven to ponder, and indeed they have guided my own thought processes throughout the project. I'm inclined to agree with Richardson (2000), who asserts:

> Writing is also a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. (923)

Thus, this approach intends to open new theoretical space for understanding the phenomenon of underage drinking, and to generate avenues of thought for reader and author alike through the interpretation or "reading" of ideas both within and between sections with markedly divergent writing styles. Indeed, I have found ideas and connections generated through the expression of my own experiences to be valuable contributions to my analytical approach to issues of underage drinking, and vice versa.

Of course, there are challenges to this approach, as well as advantages. The most obvious of these is that a reader may deem the narrative sections to be vacuous, or unconvincing as simulations of adolescent social experiences with alcohol. If either of these turn out to be the case, then it seems likely that there are flaws in the construction or presentation of ideas within these sections, and the dissatisfied reader must surely wonder if the theory that informs the writing should be re-evaluated. Of course, the successful integration of these scenes does not in itself ensure the validity of the ideas they express, and thus their contributions must be incorporated with care into the larger discussion, in any case. In addition to concerns about integration of these narrative elements, however, the stories themselves pose a problem of perspective. Specifically, the fact that these vignettes proceed from my own experiences and conversations risks constructing for the reader an unduly narrow perspective of underage drinking experience. Indeed, my own experience as a white, urban, middle-class male inevitably underpins both my approach to, and representations of underage drinking, particularly because of the semi-autobiographical focus of the work. Therefore, there are necessarily limitations on the texture and breadth of the analysis to follow; for example, the

heterogeneity of adolescent experience as it is structured by gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc., cannot be fully addressed due to the methodological limitations of this semi-autobiographical focus.

In spite of the limitations necessitated by the incorporation of my own lived experiences, I would reiterate that these narrative sections are nonetheless crafted, adapted. Their role as contrast to and bridge between formalized academic sections is enhanced by an approach to writing that seeks to integrate, express and examine a wide variety of issues related to underage drinking and the events depicted. Here once again, I believe that the interplay between writing styles is particularly effective: the narrative segments draw the reader and the discussion to focus upon a singular event and its microcosmic issues, while inviting careful consideration of the implications of these issues to the larger discussion. At the same time, however, these segments are informed by the formal discussion that offsets them on both sides, and therefore must be considered in light of this broader scope, and the empirical claims of academic literature that incorporates a variety of perspectives on adolescent drinking. It is my contention, therefore, that in spite of the limits of a semi-autobiographical approach, the synergy of creative and traditional social-scientific writing orientations is advantageous for the project's interests and concerns.

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Introduction: A moment of choice

The party was going just fine. Great, even. The tunes were solid, the night was young and we already had around 15 people inside. Mostly they were just friends of ours, but Alaina Richardson[1] and a couple of her lackey-wannabe-sluts had showed up about ten minutes ago as well – much to our surprise – making this a bona fide event. We'd thought that Josh was just making shit up as usual when he'd told us Alaina was going to be coming, but lo and behold – she arrived and finally our years of generosity in letting Josh hang around with us back when he was a greasy-haired loser paid off. Now that he'd become running back for the football team and stopped keeping comics in his locker, suddenly Josh wasn't such a social catastrophe. It was even starting to come in handy, having a jock for a friend. And Alaina wasn't even the only prep that Josh had invited, or so he said.

"Nick?"

I was laughing when I heard my name, sitting with Tom, Josh and Karen on the counters in the kitchen. It took me a moment to compose myself, then another empty second to realize who was addressing me. Alaina Richardson herself was striding towards me, her usual dazzling, fake smile barely noticeable amidst the shine of her fingernails, lip-gloss, and new red/orange highlights. She seemed to glow more than usual, even in the weak light of the single fluorescent bulb over the stove.

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[1] All names that appear in narrative sections of the present project are fictionalized.

"Uh, yeah?" I was too surprised to muster anything wittier. I didn't really think she knew my name. Why would she know my name? Why the hell was she coming over to talk to *me*, when Josh was sitting right over there?

"Can you move your feet so I can put these in the fridge?" she brandished a bag, which matched her nails and eyeshadow, producing a noticeable clink of glass from within.

"What? Oh, sure." I whipped my feet from where they'd been resting against the fridge door so fast that I nearly fell off the counter. Bracing myself ungracefully against the cupboards, I tried to play it cool while she opened the fridge and scanned doubtfully for available shelf-space among the mishmash of cooling pop cans and suburban rations.

"Here, you can put them on the bottom there," Karen chirped as she jumped down from the counter and moved to help. It was her party and her fridge, after all. She grabbed a case of Coke resting on the lowest shelf and heaved it out onto the counter, making room for whatever Alaina had brought, beer by the sound of it.

A shiver of what was probably excitement quicksilvered down my spine as Alaina flipped open the bag nonchalantly, standing so close that I could smell her hair and her perfume, all the while not bothering to acknowledge Karen's presence or the rapt attention of everyone in the room. Alaina was cool, so I figured she must drink all the time, and I was pretty certain she was used to drawing stares in a room full of losers like us who don't. Maybe lots of cool people were coming tonight after all, and they'd all

be bringing drinks. Another shiver. Maybe this was going to turn into one of *those* parties. A real party, for once.

Alaina's stylish and surprisingly spacious bag gave birth to a succession of gleaming glass bottles, first a four-pack of coolers and then two-sixes of vodka, rum and something else clear with a label that I didn't recognize, each of which she clinked nonchalantly into place in the fridge without a word or a glance for any of us. Karen tried to fill the silence, playing the good hostess:

"There's beer in there too, if you want."

There is? Whose beer? Where did Karen get it?

"Nah. Thanks, but I'm good." Alaina answered, with just a hint of coldness. Tom, Josh and I barely noticed, however, for all three of us were staring at Karen now, eyebrows raised. Still trying to play it cool, Karen shrugged and opened the fridge again.

"You guys want a beer?" Just like that. Just like that she reached into the fridge and pushed aside stacked cans of kiddie drinks to reveal about a dozen bottles of beer crouching in wait at the back of the shelf. Karen handed Alaina one of the coolers she'd just taken out of her bag and then turned to us, trying to seem casual and aloof while her gaze darted between us, avoiding our inquisitive looks. There were a shitload of questions that I wanted to ask Karen, but not with Alaina standing there watching. I had thought that Karen was pretty much against booze – she went to church every Sunday, didn't she? What the fuck?

"Yeah, hit me." Tom answered first, accepting a beer with a deliberate sort of cool. I'd never seen Tom drink, but he'd told us that he once got drunk with his cousins, so I wasn't really surprised. He said it was the best feeling he ever had. And that he'd been so drunk he couldn't walk.

"Nah, not for me yet," Josh shook his head as Karen turned to offer one to him. "I've gotta go pick up my bro at the movies in an hour. I'll be back, though, so keep some on ice for me."

"You could have one before you go though, right?" Alaina asked sweetly as she twisted open her cooler.

"No way. My bro is a little prick; he'd totally rat me out to my dad."

"OK, whatever. See you later then." Alaina made a sympathetic face and turned to go. I couldn't believe that the new social-climbing Josh would turn down anything Alaina Richardson asked of him, but there it was. I was stunned for a moment –

But then I realized that they were all looking at me now. Karen was pointing a Molson Canadian in my direction, one eyebrow arched inquisitively. I hesitated, staring at what could be my very first beer, feeling their eyes, feeling lame, feeling tingly feeling heat feeling like I knew feeling thirsty feeling time pass feeling like this was a stupid teen movie feeling

like I had to decide, and quickly.

It seems appropriate to commence a study of underage drinking from one point at which the behaviour itself begins: a moment of choice, a single instant in which a whole

host of factors constrict around the adolescent subject to force a decision. For most North Americans, choices about alcohol are encountered before adulthood, and before the age at which the purchase or consumption of alcohol is legally permitted. Indeed, almost half of Canadian youth experiment with alcohol use before the age of 15 (Haans & Hotton, 2004), a behaviour whose cultural reception is ambiguous at best. Underage drinking is so prevalent that many understand it to be normal (Jaynes & Rugg, 1988, 7), yet at the same time it bears a variety of legal, moral and social implications that render it difficult to dismiss as simply a commonplace, everyday activity. I will argue that this behaviour is deeply fraught with meaning and consequence, and is anything but unexceptional. The experiences of adolescents with alcohol are extremely diverse, however, and so generalizations about the significance, meaning or effect of alcohol within the lives of youth are often difficult to sustain. Why, then, should this study begin with a focus upon the moment of choice, and moreover upon a single instance of this choice? The scene depicted above should not be mistaken for a standard or typical representation of an adolescent's choice to drink or not to drink, as that is not its intended role. Rather, the value of this narrative is that it introduces a number of the issues pertinent to alcohol and the adolescent subject, illustrating how youth negotiate a complex array of interrelated social and psychological factors relevant to underage drinking.

It is this complicated milieu that the present study seeks to engage, with the goal of exploring the manner in which the phenomenon of underage drinking is constituted by and for adolescents. Though the role and the impact of alcohol upon the lives of youth are variable, there are certainly commonalities in how the meaning of drinking and drunkenness among youth are constructed. Exploring some of these shared issues is one

primary goal of the present work; but, underage alcohol consumption is also a social phenomenon that is constituted according to multiple, conflicting and ambiguous meanings at a number of levels, including popular culture, scholarly literature, interpersonal relationships, and the adolescent individual. Thus, it is an equally important aim to map these sites of contest and ambiguity, and, in so doing, to grapple with the difficulties inherent in understanding this social phenomenon, which I am arguing is not readily reducible to clean, succinct formulations or explanations. Indeed, underage drinking can be a messy, complicated milieu for adolescents and scholars alike, and it with this understanding that the present project begins. The exploratory aims of this work are aided by the incorporation of narrative vignettes, through which I continually seek to add additional texture to the analysis. These narratives integrate and expand upon elements of the larger discussion, while at the same time shifting perspective and drawing the focus of the text to the level of personal and group experiences of adolescent individuals. This technique, then, is complementary to my aims of delineating and evaluating the commonalities, contradictions and ambiguities in the manner in which underage drinking is constituted socially.

To begin, let us return to the vignette above and Nick's looming decision. As he contemplates his first drink, we must ask: what are the factors at play here? What are the reasons that teens begin to drink, and, conversely, what are the reasons that Nick might turn down the proffered beer? Scholarship in the field of underage alcohol consumption highlights a plethora of the reasons that youth drink, including fun and social comfort (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002), "affiliations with cliques and social crowds" (Hussong, 2002, 218), "boredom and emptiness" (Kafka & London, 1991), to find "joy" or "escape"

(Miller, Alberts, Hecht, Trost & Krizek, 2000, 80), and the influence of "ongoing relationships and established identities as possible determinants of social influence" (Bank, Biddle, Anderson, Hauge, D. Keats, J. Keats, Marlin & Valentin, 1985, 165). Conversely, Nick may refuse the beverage because of fear, moral objections, taste, the negative examples of others, physiological side effects, or potential social or legal consequences (Miller et. al, 2000, 60-71). Any or all of these reasons could be at work in Nick's case, as well as numerous other factors cited less frequently. Clearly, there are many potential influences upon the decisions of youth to drink or not, yet at root these influences are bound to the manner in which alcohol itself is constituted by and for teens. The social meanings of alcohol itself, then, seem a good point of departure for an analysis of underage drinking. Consider, for instance, some of the numerous associations made by Nick and his friends with alcohol in a short span of time: social status or "cool", adult behaviour, religious or moral identity, an exciting social situation, risk, social expectations, transgression, ownership and value. The manner in which alcohol is constructed and represented among teens is an important area of concern, and so the meanings of alcohol for youth will be the first subject of analysis within the present study.

The social meanings associated with alcohol are of course deeply intertwined with adolescents' personal experiences of drinking underage. The social consumption of alcohol carries powerful, immediate and continuing implications for the individual drinker, and their perception and presentation of their selves. Witness, for instance, the tendency of Nick (and likely of his friends as well) to associate drinking behaviour directly with identity, status and character. These issues are socially negotiated, to be

sure, but they also have pervasive implications for the personal and subjective responses of youth to alcohol and drinking. It is important, therefore, to explore the implications of underage drinking in terms of the self and the adolescent subject, as these individual and personal concerns interact with social and societal interpretations of intoxication. Further, an analysis of issues relating to identity and the subject will both inform and augment the subsequent focus of this project on the wider contexts in which teens are immersed. To this end, topics of self-esteem, identity, self-awareness, control, and responsibility will be pursued with respect to drinking and drunkenness. Though these would seem to be difficult areas to approach in terms of empirical research, there are in fact a number of studies in the field which focus directly or indirectly on how personal issues and personal meanings impact drinking behaviour (e.g., Adalbjarnardottir, 2002; Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Conger & Smith, 1997; Mainous III & Martin, 1996; Williams & Ricciardelli, 1999). The findings of such research will be considered in the context of a closer examination of the preoccupations of the adolescent subject with respect to alcohol. This, then, will constitute the second substantive analytical section of the present work.

Decisions and opinions about drinking are on the one hand highly individualized, since youth are forced to respond to alcohol personally, whatever their social setting. However, to over-emphasize this perspective risks limiting choice and meaning to the subjects themselves, without adequate consideration of the other elements at play. For this reason, an analysis of the socio-cultural context in which youth confront these issues must be added to an understanding of subjective concerns, as each must surely inform the other. For instance, let us consider Nick and his friends once more: as beer is offered,

would it make sense to conceptualize each moment of choice as limited only to the fixed meanings, opinions and values of each individual, independent of other factors? Could these personal responses to alcohol have emerged or developed spontaneously within young people without the input of their social circumstances? It seems inadequate to proceed as though personal introspection and reasoning on the part of teens were the sole factors responsible for their decisions and attitudes, though it is possible and even likely that choices surrounding alcohol are experienced by the youth themselves as wholly personal ones. Indeed, adolescents are often unaware of many of the ways that their sociocultural environment structures their experience of alcohol and drinking – after all, could anyone claim to be fully cognizant of the myriad impacts of such diverse influences as media representations, role models and cultural expectations upon these experiences? Nevertheless, scholarship has identified these as potentially powerful sources of influence (e.g., Kelly & Edwards, 1998; Andrews, Hops & Duncan, 1997; Moore & Laflin, 1996, respectively).

Of particular importance to underage drinking, then, is the larger social context within which youth confront alcohol. Significantly, this context is shaped by the cultural and developmental status of youth themselves – namely the meanings ascribed to "adolescence", "youth", or "teenagers". As Cottle (2001) writes,

> Whether we choose to examine individual adolescents or the systems in which they function, their accomplishments or deficits, their intelligences or disorders, our perspectives represent social constructions, which means that adolescents will define themselves according to these same constructions. (53)

Although I tend to believe that Cottle here elides adolescents' own agency and self-determination, his point is well taken nevertheless: social constructions of what it means to be adolescent affect interpretations of these individuals and their actions – even

interpretations among adolescents themselves are not free of this conceptual context. Thus, the expectations and characteristics of this broad developmental category carry a profound relevance to the practice and conception of drinking underage. For instance, "the powers of conformity, rebellion and idealism gain especial prominence in the lives of adolescents" (Cottle, 2001, 62), and certainly these are "powers" with important implications for underage alcohol consumption, and bear further scrutiny. Adolescence as a sociocultural backdrop for the drinking behaviour of youth seems a valuable site of exploration for the present study. For this reason, I will explore the implications of "adolescence", developmental expectations, and maturity for understanding drinking among youth.

One of the most obvious notions of which the vignette involving Nick and his friends reminds us is that whatever subjective, interpretive or contextual factors happen to be involved, an adolescent's first experience of alcohol tends to occur in the presence of others. In other words, one's first choices about drinking tend to be made in a social setting, as "it is primarily friends who offer friends alcohol and drugs, regardless of age" (Miller et al., 2000, 53). With this context in mind, the opinions, judgements and behaviours of those present during a drinking experience must certainly come into play as well. In other words, it matters to youth who is present, who is watching, and what judgements and consequences are at stake within the group(s) of people involved. With respect to peers, relational dynamics are necessarily affected by the introduction of such a potentially volatile substance into the social milieu. Moreover, "the peer context is perhaps the most salient, robust predictor of an adolescent's substance use" (Hussong, 2002, 207), and so it becomes important to interrogate how alcohol transforms the

friendships and social interactions among youth, as well as the manner in which peer relationships shape the choices and behaviours of individuals with respect to drinking. In particular, issues of pressure, influence, conformity and identity can become prominent, as illustrated within the party situation represented above. In short, the interactions and dynamics within peer groups need to be examined in terms of their role and importance to the phenomenon of underage drinking, as adolescents themselves comprise, at least intuitively, the pivotal social context in which it transpires.

Peers can become extremely influential in terms of alcohol and drinking, yet they are not the sole social group that can affect an adolescent's choices, values and attitudes in this area. Indeed, there is some debate in the literature as to whether peers or family have a greater impact on underage drinking. For instance, although some studies make claims such as, "perceived parental attitudes significantly influence alcohol use among underage drinkers" (Yu, 1998, 2698), others have demonstrated that parental alcohol use is perhaps not a significant influence, when considered in the context of peer and sibling influences (Windle, 2000). Family can, however, supercede or even replace peer groups as the primary environment in which experimentation takes place, as would seem to be the case with the character Tom in the scene above (who had prior experience drinking with his cousins). Moreover, there are also a number of issues specific to the context of the family that are directly relevant to adolescents confronted with alcohol in a given social setting. Parental surveillance (Alexander & Campbell, 1968) and authority (Barnes, 1990), for example, are significant considerations for most youth considering drinking. Consider, for instance, how the threat of parental awareness and discipline prevents Josh from accepting the offered beer at Karen's party in the narrative scene

above, in spite of his apparent desire to partake and the potential social rewards. These seem to be salient and obvious concerns for many youth engaged in what is constituted as illegal behaviour. The impact of family, however, cannot be limited to potential consequences of transgressive behaviour. In fact, family – and parents in particular – play an important role in structuring the values and choices of youth with respect to drinking even before alcohol is available to their children socially. There is evidence that drinking is a learned behaviour (Banks et al., 2000; Orcutt, 1978), and so modelling and the examples set by family members of drinking behaviour become important considerations for the present study. Further, "the family, as the basic social unit of society, can be expected to exert powerful influences on the development of social behaviours such as adolescent drinking" (Barnes, 1990), and so it seems that adolescents' opinions about alcohol and drunkenness are likely structured to some degree by their upbringing. In addition, research has identified the type and quality of family life (e.g., Stephenson & Henry, 1996), as well as communication and family relationships (e.g. Kafka & London, 1991) as factors that can affect underage drinking. The impact of family, then, upon the perceptions and choices of youth is often indirect or antecedent, and thus perhaps less visible, yet remains a critical consideration for the study of adolescent alcohol consumption.

It should be clear, therefore, that the present study is ambitious in that it seeks to examine many facets of underage drinking with a focus on their interdependence and interconnection. It is not my intention to argue the primacy of a single influence, idea or context, as the myriad of ways in which alcohol is incorporated into the social lives of youth forbids totalizing empirical or theoretical generalizations. Indeed, this study is not

exhaustive, though the issues discussed therein are those that research and experience have identified to me as the most salient. Nevertheless, through an explicit focus upon the interplay between social meanings, constructions and contexts of underage drinking, I am working towards a deeper, more textured understanding that might enrich and expand upon conventional modes of thought in this field of research. This project, then, is an exploratory engagement with social constructions of underage alcohol consumption that seeks to delineate and reflect upon the complexity, ambiguity, and implications of this social phenomenon.

The State of the Literature

My first, most powerful impression of literature in the field of underage drinking was that it is overwhelmingly quantitative in methodological orientation. Indeed, the foremost academic journal in this area, the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, is a steadfast quantitative and statistical venue. Although I was initially discouraged by the deluge of statistics, given that my own approach was decidedly theoretical and qualitative, I found that these studies were in fact extremely helpful as an empirical basis from which I could embark upon analysis, synthesis, and theoretical discussions. Moreover, it makes a good deal of practical sense for studies in the field to be designed this way, as perhaps the easiest, most direct, and legally and politically uncomplicated method of obtaining data from minors on their illegal activities is to survey students in school.

Here are some brief, illustrative examples:

- In Mainous III and Martin's 1996 project,

> A survey of 823 students was conducted at a suburban public high school in the Southeastern United States. The questionnaire contained a scale focusing on fulfilment of adolescent needs, the Children's Depression Inventory, and items on current substance use. (807)

- Schulenberg and colleagues' 1999 study follows

> two cohorts of students (N=1,297)...annually from sixth through eighth grade to determine: (a) temporal relationships among susceptibility to peer influence to misbehave, perceived exposure to peer drinking, and alcohol overindulgence; (b) cohort and gender differences in these relationships; and (c) moderating influences of susceptibility on the exposure-overindulgence relationship. (108)

Often, these studies are focused on quantifying variables and factors that contribute to adolescents' drinking behaviour. Stephenson and Henry's 1996 project is a typical example in this regard:

> Using self-report questionnaire data from high school students (N=253), the relation between adolescents' perceptions of family characteristics and adolescent substance use patterns were examined. (59)

Measures employed within this study, with the goal of "examining family characteristics as predictors of substance use" (69) include: the Family Celebration Index, the Family Hardiness Index, a 17-item modification of the Family Time and Routines Index, the Family Coping Coherence Scale, the Adolescent Family Life Satisfaction Index, the Substance Use Indicator scale, and questions regarding perceptions of parents' substance use.

Not all studies rely on similar indexes and operational variables, of course. Witness, for instance, the work of Adalbjarnardottir and Hafsteinsson, in 2001:

> The relationship between parenting style and adolescent substance use (tobacco, alcohol, hashish, and amphetamines) was examined concurrently (at age 14) for licit drug use and longitudinally (from age 14 to 17) for both licit and illicit drug use in a sample of 347 youth from compulsory schools in Reykjavik, Iceland. (401)

This study assessed adolescents' substance use at different ages, in addition to measuring data on parenting style using scales for "Acceptance/Involvement and Strictness/Supervision" (409). Thus, the research examined relationships "between parenting styles and adolescent substance use, both concurrently and longitudinally…after controlling for several influential factors" (417).

Clearly, then, there is a preoccupation within the field with attempts to measure in a quantitative fashion the factors that relate to underage drinking behaviour. However, there is not necessarily agreement on the best, most common or most applicable means to capture statistics. The most distinctive methodological consistency appears in the use of survey data, particularly with respect to high school students, as it comprises the vast majority of empirical information available on the drinking behaviour of adolescents. A

notable limitation of this approach is that data can only be collected from students "attending school on the day[s] of data collection" (Hussong, 2002), and so youth who have dropped out or are frequently absent from class are not represented. In any case, it is these types of quantitative, survey-based studies, which form the backbone of research in the field, that are the key empirical foundation upon which I base my subsequent analysis.

On a broad level, the quantitative methodology of research in the field may seem homogenous, yet it is imperative to note that these studies are in fact characterized by great inconsistency in terms of their key measures and categories. One of the readily evident inconsistencies, which hinders comparison and generalization, is one that I suspect is motivated by practicality: treatment of target populations of underage youth. Researchers may not always have as much choice as they would like when it comes to the populations and age groups available for study. Further, there seems to be little methodological consistency in terms of which populations of adolescents are most desirable for a given research design, and no tradition of clearly defined age or developmental categories across the field. Thus, there are some studies that are able to engage a range of ages, some that must focus on one or more discrete age categories, some that structure their studies around students of particular grade levels, some that focus on high school or junior high school students, and a few that are able to track students longitudinally, as illustrated below:

A range of ages:

- Palmqvist, Martikainen and von Wright (2003) examined a sample of adolescents aged 14-16 from 12 municipalities in Finland.

- Schafer and Leigh (1996) included a sample of adolescents aged 12-17 in their study of alcohol effect expectancies.

Discrete age categories:

- Bank and colleagues conducted a multi-national study (1985) in which they collected data from students aged 12, 15 and 18 in the United States, Australia, France and Norway.
- Schmid, Holger, Ter Bogt, Godeau, Hublet, Dias and Fotiou (2003) examined occasions of drunkenness among 15-year old students in 22 countries.

Grade levels:

- Kelly and Edwards (1998) surveyed 7th graders, 9th graders, and 11th graders in three communities in the Northeastern United States.
- A population of eighth graders and a population of ninth graders were tested by Klepp, Jones-Webb, Wagenaar, Short, Murray and Forster in 1996. These were actually treated less as distinct groups, and more as a single age group. Witness this statement: "for this age group (eighth and ninth graders) real changes with respect to alcohol and tobacco use might take place within a test-retest period of 3-4 weeks" (590).
- Wagenaar, Toomey, Murray, Short, Wolfson, and Jones-Webb (1996) analyzed baseline data that included adolescents from grades 9 and 12. Results were produced based on these two grades as discrete categories.

High school and/or junior high as a broad category:

- Williams and Ricciardelli (1999) studied high school students from three public high schools in Melbourne, Australia. Although data on age was obtained, and mean ages

reported by gender, age and development play no role whatsoever in their analysis, and thus the high school students are treated as an undifferentiated mass in this regard.

Longitudinal studies:

- Adalbjarnardottir (2002) surveyed youth at age 15, and again at age 17, two years later.
- Iannotti, Bush and Weinfurt (1996) examined fourth and fifth grade students in a predominantly African American school district, and then tracked them longitudinally for four years.
- Adalbjarnardottir and Hafsteinsson (2001) studied youth in Iceland at age 14, an again at age 17.

Ultimately, the effect of these disparate measures upon the present work is that it becomes difficult to compare results between studies. There is no consistent "industry standard" for research design in the field, so to speak. Moreover, this evident contrast in research designs reminds the reader to maintain a focus not only upon the heterogeneity of empirical data produced, but also upon the heterogeneity of youth themselves and their experiences with underage drinking. In this way, it encourages diligence and rigour in constructing a project such as my own. Therefore, the lesson of this diverse research is as follows: studies target different groups of youth, in different locations, and capture different demographic information, and so one must be cautious when generalizing about adolescents as a whole and their drinking behaviour when analyses are based on this type of empirical data.

It is not only data with respect to underage populations that merit careful consideration within this field of research, but also labels and measures of adolescent drinking behaviour. There are a variety of categories and descriptors employed, yet they seem to be largely arbitrary, and often incorporate value-laden labels. For instance, "binge drinking" is one of the most popular of these measures – indeed the most consistent – and is commonly defined as consuming 5 or more drinks on a single occasion (e.g., Beck & Treiman, 1996, 636; Klepp, Jones-Webb, Wagenaar, Short, Murray & Forster, 1996, 586). However, drinking behaviour is also subject to more vague descriptions such as "high-risk" or "high-intensity" (e.g., Beck & Treiman, 1996, 642), or similar terms such as "risk behaviour" (Mason & Windle, 2001, 50) "risky activity" or "risky behaviour" (e.g., Kuther, 2000, 599). Indeed, "risk" and "risk status" are value-laden terms frequently associated with drinking underage (e.g., Jackson, Henriksen & Dickinson, 1999). Maggs and colleagues (1995), on the other hand, choose the label "problem behaviour" as the focus of their study, which they define as "behaviour that departs from familial or social standards and that poses some risk to the well-being of the individual or to society" (344). Williams and Ricciardelli (1999) use the similar term "problem drinking" (563), which they associate with a particular score on the Adolescent Drinking Index, unlike McGue and colleagues (1996), for whom "problem drinking" is even more specific: "two items dealing with frequency of drinking five or more drinks in a row during past 2 weeks, and frequency of driving after drinking during the past year" (11). In other studies, information has been collected with the aim of producing specific totals and averages, rather than vague descriptive categories. Take, for instance, Wilks, Callan and Austin (1989), who write:

> other measures of adolescent's drinking included calculations of beer, wine and spirit consumption on a yearly basis (g), as well as total alcohol consumption (per year) and mean consumption (per day). (622)

Underage drinking is thus measured and classified in a variety of ways, and subject to a myriad of labels. Faced with this dizzying array of qualifiers, categories and descriptors for underage alcohol consumption, the present study endeavours to avoid emphasis and generalization with respect to quantity or severity of drinking behaviour. A more serious issue, however, is in the power of descriptive language employed in many studies within the field.

It should be clear that some of the terms discussed above such as "problem drinking" and "risky behaviour" are not benign in orientation; indeed they seem to reflect a normative bias. In fact, this type of language is illustrative of a particular moral and conceptual orientation characteristic of a number of works in the field. Specifically, these works will often approach the subject of underage drinking from the assumed standpoint that it is a negative or problem behaviour in need of redress. Consider, for instance, the remarks that begin Williams and Ricciardelli's 1999 study:

> The early onset, as well as the severity, of drinking problems among adolescents continues to be of concern. Levels of alcohol consumption in this age group are alarmingly high. (557)

A study framed in this manner assumes an orientation towards addressing a social "problem", and thus the results of subsequent analysis are already focused on this end: "it is clear that the prevention and amelioration of alcohol-related problems require programs designed to promote 'sensible drinking' [a concept defined elsewhere]" (563). This problem-oriented approach is not uncommon, and leads to summative statements such as the following, which seem to satisfy a desire on the part of some for practical, action-oriented research in the field:

> longitudinal data would suggest that intervention efforts that focus on changing attitudes may be ineffective at influencing substance use because these attitudes are a product of the target behaviour. (Iannotti et al., 1996, 629)

The scope and the conclusions of such projects are thus narrowed according to their perceived utility.

Some authors will go as far as to adopt the view that alcohol use by minors, whatever its causes, should be prevented, treated, and/or forbidden (e.g., Jaynes & Rugg, 1988; Loveland-Cherry, Ross & Kaufman, 1999). Perhaps the most extreme example of this tendency is Macdonald's 1989 book, whose title *Drugs, Drinking & Adolescents* is splattered on the cover with red splotches that I can only assume are intended to evoke negative connotations associated with blood. The book takes a severe tone, and sees its role explicitly as a tool to combat "the drug epidemic" (1), claiming that "any person who consumes enough alcohol on weekends to cause even occasional problems with driving or social situations has a drug problem" (7). Few works are this extreme, but it is very rare to discover authors like Arata, Stafford and Tims (2003), who directly challenge the narrow normative orientation that serves as a backdrop for some studies:

> An important issue is whether adolescents' use of alcohol is problematic merely because they are underage, or whether adolescents are, in fact, engaging in problem drinking with associated negative consequences. (567)

I have yet to come across a thorough problematization of the "negative consequences" of adolescent drinking, however. Now, it is certainly not my intention to paint the whole of research in the field with the same brush; the explicit or implicit assumption of adolescent drinking as a problem is a limiting perspective for some, but certainly not all. In any case, my own project consciously avoids constructing underage alcohol use as

problematic or unequivocally negative – with labels or otherwise – and makes every effort to keep such normative standpoints in other works from colouring my analysis.

An astute reader will no doubt have already recognized by this point that the base of research from which I draw my analysis is by no means limited to studies that deal explicitly and exclusively with alcohol consumption by adolescents. Indeed, there is a much more expansive field of scholarly work in the area of adolescent *substance use* and *drug use* that I have drawn upon to enrich the current project. One reason for this expansion of focus is that this additional literature permits much more thorough treatment of areas of emphasis within the current work, such as the role of substance use within adolescent relationships (e.g., Glassner & Loughlin, 1987; Hussong, 2002; Miller et al., 2000), self-esteem (e.g., Moore & Laflin, 1996; Schroeder, Laflin & Weis, 1993), and the role of parenting style in substance use behaviours (e.g. Andrews, Hops & Duncan, 1997; Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Conger & Smith, 1997; Kafka & London, 1991), to name a few. In these substance use studies from which I draw, alcohol still receives explicit mention, and is either treated and analyzed as an entirely separate drug (e.g., Hussong, 2001; Palmqvist et al., 2003), or subsumed beneath the general category of illicit substances and incorporated into a more general analysis (e.g., Kuther, 2000; Miller et al. 2000; Stephenson & Henry, 1996). In the case of all substance use literature, but most especially the latter group, it becomes extremely important to avoid the presumption that insights pertaining to "substance use" or "drug use" can be applied directly to alcohol use as well. In many cases, however, there

are generalizations made regarding substance use that clearly apply uncritically to alcohol as well within a given study. Take, for example, Kuther's (2000) study in which

"substance use (alcohol, marijuana, illicit drugs, and selling drugs)" (601) appears as a broad category subject to equally broad generalizations:

> Judgements of one's relation to society and the collective norms and values of society may influence the perceived control felt over activities that violate social norms, such as substance use and antisocial behaviour. (603)

Adolescent substance use and drug use studies, then, can provide valuable supplemental insight into the study of underage drinking, provided that caution is exercised such that one may avoid erroneously including information that has no applicability to the use of alcohol by adolescents.

Substance use is not the only supplemental field of research that informs the present work. Indeed, scholarly literature that pertains more generally to adolescence is pivotal to segments of the analysis that discuss cultural constructions of adolescence as an important context for negotiating meanings and choices with respect to alcohol. Nancy Lesko's *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (2001) is an especially important resource in this regard, as it deftly delineates and problematizes popular characterizations of this developmental category with a unique approach:

> The overarching aim of this book is to "trouble" these common conceptions of adolescents...To call the common conceptions of adolescents into question, my inquiry moves back and forth between the present and past, a method that intentionally violates conventional chronological historical work. (2)

Lesko's framing of issues of adolescence in temporal terms is particularly insightful and relevant to my analysis. Other strong contributors to my discussion of cultural conceptions of adolescence include Thomas Cottle's (2001) engagement of constructed adolescent consciousness, and Vappu Tyyskä's (2001) thorough exploration of the nature and state of adolescence in contemporary Canada. These and other works have added

texture to my understanding and formulations of adolescence as an important cultural backdrop that informs interpretations of underage drinking by youth, adults, and scholars alike.

Literature specific to underage alcohol consumption is supplemented within this project in other areas as well, most notably the social construction and role of alcohol itself, and the meanings and consequences of intoxication. Thorough theoretical explorations of these subjects are quite rare in scholarly works, and for this reason a number of relevant sources have been included that, although venerable, contain important insights that remain valuable to a project such as mine, undertaken in the 21st century. Chief among these is MacAndrew and Edgerton's *Drunken Comportment*, a book first published in 1969 that will be discussed in detail below. Also critical is Levine's work in 1981 on the implications of language surrounding alcohol and drunkenness, which raises a number of fascinating points that remain salient and are often overlooked. Other venerable works of note include Orcutt's theory regarding the role of norms and cultural expectations in drinking experiences (1972 and 1978), and Alexander and Campbell's early (1968) exploration of alcohol's role in self-definition and in groups. It is certainly not the case, however, that all of the available references dealing with the social role of alcohol and intoxication are dated. There are a number of more recent sources that are extremely valuable in terms of theory in these areas, including Room's (2001) work on the cultural guidelines for intoxication, Cox's elucidation of motivations and expectancies relevant to drinking in *Why People Drink* (1990), and the exploration of theories of alcohol use in *Alcohol and Human Behavior* (Rivers, 1994). Each of these is

an important resource, given the explicit emphasis within the current project upon meanings and interpretations of alcohol, drinking and drunkenness.

Let me speak here to particularly significant resources for this project:

First, I would note MacAndrew and Edgerton's *Drunken Comportment*, a landmark study, first published in 1969, which directly addresses the topic of intoxication and its social implications, boundaries, and guidelines. It is not only in subject matter that this work is singular, but in method as well, for it is informed by a vast array of anthropological and ethnographic accounts that provide a window into the treatment of alcohol and drunkenness in other cultures. These accounts are employed as part of a thorough interrogation of the physiological and social imperatives that accompany intoxication, with special attention to where one set of imperatives ends and the other begins. Consider, for example, these summative statements at the end of a section that focuses on disinhibition:

> Alcohol can be consumed – and, in many societies it is consumed – in immense quantities without producing any appreciable changes in behaviour save for a progressive impairment in the exercise of certain of one's sensorimotor capabilities…In a word, if alcohol were a "superego solvent" for one group of people due to its toxic action, then this same disinhibiting effect ought to be evident in all people. In point of fact, however, it is not. This is the first puzzle with which we confront the conventional wisdom. (36)

Indeed, this quoted section provides an effective illustration of MacAndrew and Edgerton's approach: an elucidation of the importance of the social to the experience and interpretation of intoxication that follows from detailed scrutiny of anthropological evidence. The authors are able to delineate and confront conventional understandings of drunkenness and of the effects of alcohol that remain in force today, while at the same time offering impressive insights into issues of responsibility, control and social

boundaries as they pertain to intoxication. It is easy to see, then, why this work is particularly relevant to my own project, given my uncommon focus on these very types of theoretical issues, particularly as they apply to social constructions of alcohol, the drinking subject, and drunkenness.

Second, I would note Glassner and Loughlin's solid study in the field of adolescent substance use, entitled *Drugs in Adolescent Worlds* (1987). As the title indicates, the primary focus of this work is upon use of substances other than alcohol, though drinking is discussed as well. The value of this resource, then, lies chiefly in its analysis of substance use with the adolescent perspective foremost in mind. Adolescents' own understandings and interpretations of drinking and drunkenness are a preoccupation of my own work as well, and although much of these authors' discussion deals with substance use generally, there is a great deal that is applicable to the study of alcohol use. To illustrate, here is a short passage on the topic of substance use as a means of escape:

> Lee [an interview subject] says he used alcohol in order to 'shut school off for a period.' This bridging notion is found frequently in transcripts…In discussing unpleasant feelings of boredom and depression, those who use drugs are emphasizing their efforts to avoid unsatisfying states. In other contexts, however, they discuss a different aspect of drug use, the more positive experience of independence and self-control. (50)

This emphasis upon the perspectives, beliefs and conceptualizations of youth themselves is achieved mainly through the interpretation of qualitative data, as demonstrated within the above quotation. From this data, the authors are able to make a number of theoretical and thematic assertions that are directly relevant to the present project, particularly with respect to issues of self-control, peer pressure, parent-adolescent relationships, and substance use decision-making. Moreover, the authors maintain a strong focus upon the manner in which conceptions of youth and adolescence shape the substance use

behaviours of young people and interpretations of the same, as evidenced by this early statement: "assumptions about adolescence have been central to social concern with drug use" (10). Glassner and Loughlin's conscious emphasis on adolescents' own perspective, then, is primarily responsible for the prominent place of their insights in my own analysis.

Thirdly, *Adolescent Relationships and Drug Use*, a collaborative study penned by Miller, Alberts, Hecht, Trost and Krizek (2000), is a detailed examination of adolescent substance use that underscores its "communicative and relational features" (xi). This emphasis is congruent with that of my own project, which is also deeply concerned with the contexts, relationships and interactions that structure the experience of underage consumption. Miller and colleagues' research is principally comprised of insights gleaned from several studies funded by the National Institute on Drug Use (USA), though they also make extensive use of relevant scholarly material. In this way, they are able to address a wide range of topics related to substance use in the context of adolescent relationships. Indeed, this broad scope renders the work attractive for my purposes, as it contains important contributions in a number of key areas. For instance, the section dealing with the symbolic construction of substance use among adolescents is of special interest, embedded with the notion that "language, culture, and action constitute a continuous process of mutual influence" (73). In addition, their discussion centred around the influence of family and peer relationships on adolescent substance use is a key resource, as is the section that explores the social processes of offers and refusals to partake of illicit substances. This study, then, is significant not only in terms of its focus

on communication and relationships, but also as a result of its dutiful scrutiny of language and interpersonal processes relevant to substance use among adolescents.

It should be clear that the present work intends both to situate itself within the field of underage alcohol consumption, and to distinguish itself as unique. Although the empirical work of others is foundational to my analysis, my combination of theoretical and narrative perspectives departs significantly from the norm of research in this area. Moreover, the theoretical orientation of the present work has required me to seek resources outside of the narrow field of adolescent drinking, incorporating literature focused upon substance use and adolescence, as well as theory on alcohol and intoxication. In doing so, I am faced with the task of intertwining insights stemming from disparate sources and approaches with empirical underage drinking studies that themselves lack consistency. A great deal of care, then, is required to avoid erroneously comparing, conflating, or generalizing where the studies themselves do not permit such integration. To that end, I eschew discussion of measures of quantity or severity with respect to drinking behaviour, and I make every effort to avoid generalizing about adolescents *as a whole* where such broad statements are inappropriate. In short, the disparities and inconsistencies among academic resources force diligence, difficulty and rigor upon me, as author of the present work. Such is the price of distinguishing oneself from one's field.

Booze

As I push open the door and step into the hallway, the noise hits me with the force of a waterfall. Students are everywhere, laughing and shouting, fighting and teasing, slamming lockers and throwing things. Teachers walk quickly with heads held high, islands of nervous quiet striding through the rows of police-blue lockers to their calm little desks. It's deafening in here – a little dizzying too – and for a moment I'm convinced that the lockers are quaking slightly from the force of the din.

They aren't, though. It's just that I've been drinking, and the whole world seems a little unsteady.

"Fuck." I didn't mean to say that out loud. It's later than I thought, though – the clock says 12:52 and lunch is almost over. Why am I still standing here? I've gotta go find my friends.

I'm not sure if I can walk straight, all of a sudden. I was walking straight on the way from the car, right? Do I look drunk? Sometimes my eyes get red when I drink. I need a mirror.

Here we go. Just one foot in front of the other, girl. You can do this.

I'm doing pretty well as I cross the hall and start up the stairs, no wobbling or stumbling or anything. Nobody can tell, I'm pretty sure. I'm concentrating pretty hard, though, so I'm not really paying attention to what's going on around me. Someone just said hi to me on their way by and I don't even know who it was. All the people and conversations are like water rushing by my ears; I'm just focusing on keeping the floor level. I almost run

into some punk-guy at the top of the stairs and he and his friend bristle and stare, all furrowed brows and hair-spikes – but then they're dark blurs behind me and I'm in the next hall and I can see my girls waiting for me. Angela steps forward, looking anxious. She's so uptight; always has to be worried about something.

"Chelsea how come you missed math? Where were you?"

"I uh...went for a drive with Kevin," I say, trying not to smile. Failing.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me!" the three of them lean forward expectantly.

"So?" Michelle asks, voice pitched lower. "What happened?"

"Oh, not much," I shrug nonchalantly. "We made out a little, I guess."

"So you didn't..." Michelle always needs to know everything about everyone. It's annoying. I hit her with my best withering glare.

"Of *course* not! We just met last weekend at that – "

"But you like *made out*, right? Did you let him – "

"Jesus Christ Michelle! You're so nosy! We just made out, alright? Maybe stop pushing into everyone else's shit and find your *own* action, OK?" She blinks as though I'd slapped her.

"Whatever. I'll see you guys in class." She spins and stalks off. Honestly, she's such a spazz.

Angela, Jill and I stand staring at each other. Maybe I went over the top with that one. But still, Michelle just –

The bell rings, and I look around, noticing that the halls are almost empty now.

"Hey, have you been drinking?" Jill whispers, squinting up at me. If anyone would notice, it'd be her.

"Why, can you smell it?

"Yeah."

"Shit. We got slurpies and Kevin had some rum...it was pretty strong, I guess."

"So you brought it with you?" Jill is looking incredulously at the red convenience store cup in my left hand.

"Holy – I guess...damn, I totally wasn't thinking!" There's still about a third of it left, and when I bring it up to my face it smells powerfully of rum. "Shit. I guess I should chuck this."

"Ditch it or finish it."

"You want it?"

"Nah."

"I have gum! Do you need gum?" Angela pipes up, darting glances around us for teachers. There aren't any, of course. Still, best not leave it to chance.

"Let's go to the bathroom."

"Why? Are you gonna throw up?"

"No! What the– " I let out a breath through my teeth. Angela's just dumb, no need to jump all over her, I guess. "Makeup." The three of us duck

into the bathroom and find it empty. I think for a moment, then decide I've still got a pretty good buzz going and toss the cup into the garbage. Angela watches it fall, then hands me two pieces of gum and we move to the mirrors to touch up.

"So how're you feelin'?" her gaze keeps flicking over towards me in the mirror.

"Fine. Great."

"Um...so what about class?"

"What about it?"

"Well, should I run and get you some coffee or something? You know you get all..." she crosses her eyes and mimes talking with her hand. I can't decide whether to laugh or hit her.

"Angela, they don't serve coffee in the caf."

"Right, but maybe I could run down and get you a Coke or something..."

"I told you: I'm good. Besides, that doesn't work anyway. Caffeine is no good."

"OK, here's the thing," Jill is suddenly standing behind the two of us, arms crossed, looking impatient. "Right now is English, and Marsh won't even notice if you skip...and even if he does he won't care, so you two should go down to the caf and get some food, fries or something, and a drink too, K?"

"Yeah, but what if he asks tomorrow– "

"Then I'll right you a note. Last period is chem, though, so you'll have to be there or O'Connell will totally phone your parents."

"He's such a spazz."

"For sure. It's a review class though, so if you keep your mouth shut and read or something there's no way he should notice you, and then...hey, how're you getting home?"

"Huh? Uh, I've got my mom's car...but..."

"Yeah, thought so."

"But it should be OK though – I only had like maybe 5 shots worth or so, and it's 2 hours till school's over, so I'd be down to like 3, and good to go. Or maybe if we hang out for awhile – "

"Forget it, just...I'll drive you, then walk to my place. Just make sure to brush your teeth and stuff before your mom gets home."

"Hey, thanks. Good idea."

"We should get gone."

Once, when I was about 16, I heard something shocking about alcohol while I was on the phone with a friend of mine, bemoaning the fact that I'd awoken with a hangover after our night of drinking. It was no surprise that I had a splitting headache, she informed me, because I'd essentially been drinking poison the entire evening, hadn't I? I was quite shocked and perplexed by this, but I managed to laugh anyway, as that's what the situation seemed to demand. Nevertheless, my thought process was panicked: Poison? Does that just mean she hates vodka? No, I've seen her drink vodka. Does she

mean alcohol in general? She must. Is alcohol a type of poison, then? Is that something no one bothered to tell me? Did they learn that in biology or something? I guess it kills brain cells, doesn't it? Maybe it is a kind of poison, technically speaking. But not a real poison, right, one that could – wait, alcohol *poisoning*. People get that. Hmm, it's probably true then, biologically or chemically or whatever. Gee, alcohol probably *is* a kind of weak poison that we drink anyway because it doesn't really hurt us much, most of the time…

Reflecting upon this moment in my own history, I find myself drawn to questions of knowledge and meaning with respect to alcohol and drinking underage. It seems critically important to explore what it is that youth know/think/say about alcohol and drinking, and how they come to form these opinions, because the manner in which they view alcohol must inform the way that it is incorporated into their lives. At first glance, however, adolescent understandings of liquor seem deceptively simple. Commonsense knowledge is everywhere, and there exists "a high degree of unanimity among us concerning what we take to be at least certain of the effects of alcohol" (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, 1). For instance, alcohol is understood to cause disinhibition, sensorimotor impairment, hangovers, and the subjective state of "drunkenness." These conventional understandings of drinking are by no means new, yet they are taken for granted by most of us (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, 7-8). That is not to say, however, that North American culture is consistent or confident in defining its relationship to alcohol; indeed the relative cultural ubiquity of alcoholic beverages is curiously offset by the persistent notion that drinking is somehow morally bad, suspect, or at least indulgent (Bank, Biddle, Anderson, Hauge, D. Keats, J. Keats, Marlin & Valantin, 1985, 166-167).

Nevertheless, adolescent expectancies about the effects of alcohol correspond closely with those of adults; one comparative study has illustrated that "a simple, general factor structure (positive, negative) underlies both adolescents' and adults' beliefs about alcohol" (Schafer & Leigh, 1996, 407). Youth, like adults, are confronted with the (accurate) perception that the majority of their peers use alcohol and experience no serious problems as a consequence. It is revealing, for example, that one study reported: "the consumption patterns of underage drinkers are no different than those of our sample of legal drinkers and neither are the consequences of their drinking" (Smart, Adlaf and Walsh, 1996, 424). Indeed, Smart and colleagues found among Ontario schoolchildren that "more than three quarters of underage drinkers report no alcohol-related problem," and thus concluded that this activity was envisioned as a sort of "conventional rule-breaking" (424). On one level, then, many legal and illegal drinkers alike see alcohol as an acceptable intoxicant whose drawbacks are for the most part minimal and temporary, the effects of which are largely predictable. It is imperative to further interrogate this broad understanding, however.

The prevalence of generalized, abstract "knowledge" about drinking does not fully or adequately describe the understandings achieved by youth about the powerful signifier that is alcohol. Facts, arguments and representations of alcohol are legion; what does it really mean to a 14 year old offered a beer for the first time that drinking it may get her/him "drunk"? Myth, rumour and hearsay abound as well. Consider, for example, some of the "knowledge" about alcohol illustrated by Chelsea and her friends in the vignette above: they expressed opinions about the best way(s) to sober up, the probable effects of alcohol on their friend, the ability to act sober when impaired, the ability of the

body to process alcohol and reduce intoxication (i.e. the "math" that defines the number of drinks metabolized per hour), and detectable signs of drinking, to say nothing of the issues which emerge regarding the meanings of drunkenness and the reactions of others to the intoxicated individual. Thus, the apparent clarity and simplicity of speaking in terms of commonsense, widely held knowledge about drinking is left in ruin; such generalizations can only have value as descriptive tools at the broadest levels of analysis. Of course most youth "know" about alcohol, but what do they know, really?

There is a tremendous difference between abstract cultural truisms and knowledge achieved through lived experience, whether direct or indirect. A teen of 14 years knowing that drinking "a lot" of alcohol will probably get her/him "drunk" for the first time cannot possibly have the same understanding as a veteran underage drinker, who has experienced drunkenness and its personal and social manifestations firsthand. Consider, for example, the opinion of one youth interviewed for a newspaper in Victoria about her underage drinking:

> Nobody knows the consequences of what they're going to do because it's their first time drinking...When kids first start drinking, it's not social drinking – they want to get drunk. (Victoria Times Colonist, 6/08/2002, C-5)

Although I would take serious issue with the contention that first-time drinking is asocial, her point is well taken: experience with alcohol changes the ways in which youth interact with it (Aas, Klepp, Laberg & Aarø, 1995). Moreover, it is worthy of note that youth themselves identify direct experience as a primary source of knowledge about drinking (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002). It is not my intention to advance a simple, dichotomous perspective in which youth either possess experiential or "real" knowledge of intoxication

or not, as this is an inadequate solution. The logic breaks down, as illustrated by this dubious remark:

> in terms of drinking, for instance, adolescents usually do not have the experience or the familiarity necessary to develop intentions that can guide them through the myriad of situations in which alcohol will be presented to them. (Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Conger & Smith, 1997, 272)

This type of assertion must be viewed with caution, given that "the majority of young people use alcohol" (Health Canada, 1995, 26; see also the 2004 Statistics Canada Publication entitled Alcohol and Drug Use in Adolescence), and do so without major negative consequences – the same Health Canada study reports that "nearly one-quarter of those aged 15-24 report that their own drinking had a harmful social, emotional or physical effect" (23). Thus, the conception of knowledge/experience which underlies the statement by Blanton and colleagues must be viewed with suspicion. Instead of framing knowing and competence as privileges of a certain type of experience, as obtained and possessed, it seems much more plausible to conceive of the knowledge of underage drinkers as dynamic. This eludes the perilous line of inquiry over how much experience is required to develop the "familiarity" suggested by Blanton and colleagues, and also questions about what kinds of experience are required before an individual's knowledge is adequate, or sufficient. Consider a more subtle perspective: youth are bombarded with messages and depictions of drinking, in their own lives and the lives of others, and their knowledge and opinions are negotiated and renegotiated in this shifting context. This view accommodates the commonplace things that "everyone knows", as well as the network of nuanced and particular knowledge available to adolescent subjects as they live their lives.

An adolescent's understanding of alcohol cannot be reducible to a simple formula, or a narrow set of influences. Indeed, contributions may come from a variety of sources, and they may be direct or indirect, subtle or overt and easily recognizable to the teen. Consider, for example, the effect of visual media, within which a plethora of messages about liquor, drinking, and drinking underage are embedded. Some of the most obvious messages about alcohol are of course found in advertisements, which openly extol the social positives of drinking. Although not explicitly aimed at children, the values and messages of commercials are absorbed by youth as well, and "the outcry directed at alcohol advertisers...include[s] the alleged targeting of underage drinkers through the use of appealing image advertising" (Kelly & Edwards, 1998, 47). Research indicates, for instance, that beer ads, which are aimed almost exclusively at men, increase boys' desire to drink as well (Wyllie, Zhang & Casswell, 1998), particularly when sports content is also present within the advertisement (Slater, Reuner, Murphy, Beauvais, Van Leuven & Rodriguez, 1996, 430). Clearly the desirability of drinking is being conveyed in this way, particularly as it interacts with masculine identity. Even outside of commercials, representations of drinking and drinking underage are commonplace, and these must surely have some impact on adolescents' perspectives through the introduction or reinforcement of particular behaviours, beliefs, or values. Atkin, Hocking and Blok (1984), for instance, reported significant associations between exposure to advertising and self-reported drinking among teenagers. Observing a teenage drinking party on TV may not "cause" a teen to drink, yet at the very least it suggests that parties of this nature do occur, and that they proceed according to the kinds of behaviours depicted. The images presented thus become a part of the teen's understanding of social practice with

respect to alcohol, though one cannot necessarily measure the strength or scope of their impact on a particular individual. Researchers have been quick to note that films, advertising and TV present a positive, alluring image of adolescent drinking, particularly with respect to high school and college-aged youth (Bahk, 2001, 433; MacDonald, 1989, 82; Maddox, 1970, 107; Maggs, 1997, 363). At the same time, however, public service announcements, educational programming and some entertainment programs are explicitly focused on the risks and negative consequences of underage drinking (Maggs, 1997, 363) in an attempt to counteract representations of this behaviour as positive or commonplace. Clearly, the variable and even schizophrenic manner in which liquor is portrayed is symptomatic of the inconsistency and mixed messages that are characteristic of alcohol's social treatment in general (Shaw, 2002, 8).

Alcohol becomes the site of conflicting representation and interpretation, connoting maturity or sociability one moment, and danger or immorality the next (Roth & Friedman, 1990, 185). Drinking underage is constituted both as an ordinary "rite of passage from childhood to adulthood" and a cause for "significant concern on the part of parents, teachers, researchers and policymakers" (Pagliaro & Pagliaro, 1996, 31), yet the essential fact remains: almost all youth are confronted with choices and social situations revolving around alcohol sooner or later. There is a need as an adolescent to develop values, knowledge and opinions about drinking – one can hardly resist doing so – and so youth must draw upon the relevant cultural influences selectively (though not necessarily deliberately). Some messages are stronger than others. Individuals are influenced in different ways by different cultural stimuli (Bahk, 2001, 434). Moreover, youth are not simply passive recipients of values and ideas; both the information received and its

sources are frequently subject to critical examination by teens themselves, who are not merely "passive respondents to external influences" (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 12). In addition, all of this cultural information is mediated and evaluated in the context of relationships, experiences, personality and psychology. Thus, it becomes less important to the present project to focus upon what adolescents "know" about drinking per se, and more important to interrogate the manner in which alcohol and its *meanings* are incorporated and negotiated within their social worlds. This is a similarly complicated endeavour.

Managing the Negatives: Risk, Danger, and Fear

At age 16, you'll recall, I had decided, based on hearsay, insecurity and an offhand remark from a friend of mine that drinking alcohol was, in essence, tantamount to poisoning the body in (hopefully) small enough doses to do little real, lasting damage. Funny thing, though: the next time someone offered me a drink, I took it and slammed it back all the same, pausing only to note (with a smirk) that the very same friend who'd let me in on the "poison info" was already on her third beverage of the evening. I knew that there were risks involved, and that there could be negative consequences to drinking, both sooner and later, but I did it anyway. Similarly, we observe in the vignette which began this chapter that risks do not prevent the main character/narrator Chelsea from engaging in behaviour with potentially serious consequences: drunkenness at school, drinking and driving (we wonder, also, if Kevin was drinking during their "drive" together), and sexual behaviour under the influence of alcohol. These potential catastrophes haven't deterred her either, however, though others would perhaps have

made different decisions under similar circumstances. There's a tendency within popular discourse to brush these kinds of decisions off as the misguided, stupid and reckless actions of adolescents, who are bound to experiment. Yet not nearly as many adolescents "experiment" with hallucinogens (only 11% of those aged 12-15, compared to 42% who have tried alcohol, according to Hans & Hotton, 2004), cosmetic surgery, or violent crime. It must be the case that the social identity of alcohol is such that adolescents drink in spite of the overt, concerted attempts of authority figures (and academics) to define this behaviour as "risky". Are the risks really so grave, or is it just a case of adolescents ignoring/denying potential consequences? Is there something more going on here?

Perhaps the most obvious point in favour of shrugging off potential risks is the fact that alcohol is deemed a legal drug. Adults can (technically at least) drink as much as they like whenever they have the free time to do so, without evoking many of the same concerns for their safety. This fact has led some to speculate that youth fail to see alcohol as a drug at all, given that in their future it will cease to be forbidden as harmful (e.g. Roth & Friedman, 1990, 185). While this suggestion may indeed carry some weight, research indicates that adolescents are well aware that alcohol is potentially harmful – certainly they are more aware than previous generations of the dangers involved in drinking – yet this awareness does not seem to inhibit their behaviours (Gerrard, Gibbons, Benthin & Hessling, 1996). Teens, then, have generally assimilated messages that alcohol use can lead to problems with addiction, judgement, coordination, and mental or physical health (Selman & Adalbjarnardottir, 2000, 47). In spite of this, "teenagers perceive alcohol as less risky than other drugs" (Miller, Alberts, Hecht, Trost & Kriziek, 2000, 5). Adolescents are not, for the most part, engaging in simple denial of

these consequences, however (Gerrard et al., 1996). It seems likely that part of the reason for viewing liquor as relatively harmless is the clear tradition of underage drinking (Maddox, 1970, 118). Within this tradition, it is often the case that "one's peers are perceived as more permissive and as drinking more...than oneself" (Makela, 1997, 729), strengthening the popular notion that "all the cool kids are doin' it" – and that they're doing it without major negative consequences. Yet the dangers remain, and youth are peppered with education/prevention messages, in school and in the media. The wealth of educational and prescriptive messages forced upon North American youth don't seem to be able to curb the tolerance and prevalence of underage drinking, though:

> It appears that society's more liberal attitude toward alcohol has had more influence on the attitudes of adolescents than all the influence exerted by prevention campaigns up to now. (Palmqvist, Martinaiken & Von Wright, 2003, 202; Tobler & Stratton, 1997)

How, then, are constructions of drinking as risky and dangerous neutralized among adolescents? Can we illuminate the manner in which this danger is managed by youth, and discover what attitudes – "liberal" or otherwise – might be at play in their disregard for risk?

There are a variety of theories that purport to explain the continuing desire of youth to drink underage despite the array of consequences with which they are threatened. Common explanations include adolescent egocentrism, an undeveloped perspective of the future, competing social goals, the pressures of dealing with changes in their selves and their lives, and the influence of social relationships (Selman & Adalbjarnardottir, 2000, 48). It becomes difficult to isolate specific explanations from among these as definitively more or less important, especially for the purposes of generalizing about such a complex phenomenon as underage drinking. It is perhaps more

revealing to explore what insight can be gleaned from attempting to consider adolescents' own perspectives. Underlying adolescent decisions about drinking, there seems to be some weighing of consequences, however small. Even the basic cognitive response required by the offer of an alcoholic beverage necessitates a moment of reflexivity in which the subject decides whether they do, in fact, want to accept or reject the offer, and it is in this very moment that consequences may be taken into conscious consideration. Decisions about whether or not to drink (and how much) frequently demand some analysis of cost and benefit, however little the subject may be aware of this process. Some have suggested that risk-taking behaviour of this nature is in fact coordinated to a significant extent with beliefs about its costs and benefits (Maggs, Almeida & Galambos, 1995, 358). It is not my intention here to advance some simplistic notion of drinking as ultimately rational choice – we are dealing with *perceived* probabilities of positives and negatives, for a specific individual at a specific time, subject to influence from the social, emotional and psychological variables of the moment. Nevertheless, the adolescent subject must frequently determine, at that moment, whether the risk of negative consequences that may or may not come to pass is too great. Given that most teens drink at some time or another, this tells us that the risks of drinking are simply not perceived as severe enough to prevent it, and/or that perceived positives supercede negatives in importance or magnitude.

There are, of course, perceived positives to drinking and drinking underage in particular, some of which I will examine in more detail below. It is worthwhile to note, however, that risk-taking itself may entail a number of enticements for youth. For instance, teens identify the excitement of the novel or forbidden, the importance of

achieving control over the unknown or unpredictable, and feelings of responsibility and maturity that come from a risk well taken as benefits of risk-taking itself (Lightfoot, 1997, 104-105). Indeed, positives may be more significant to teens in any case; "it was the perceptions of fun rather than risk that were the most consistent and salient predictors of risk-taking" (Maggs et al., 1995, 359). It seems likely that the roots of this curious emphasis are to be found in the culture and construction of adolescence itself, a phenomenon which will be explored in a subsequent chapter. A focus upon the positives of drinking, then, as well as upon the benefits of risk-taking itself, may cause negative consequences to recede in importance for adolescents.

A friend of mine was once hospitalized in ninth grade in order to have her stomach pumped as a result of drinking too much at a party. At the time, the potential effect of this event upon those who were present and those who soon heard the tale was significant; not only was this Trouble with a capital T, but it was a powerful demonstration of very real danger associated with drinking. It was interesting to observe the reactions of those within her circle of friends with respect to their own drinking thereafter. Rather than reflecting upon their own behaviour, the tendency was to locate blame within the individual (much as her parents were doing). I heard phrases such as "she should've eaten more" and "she should've known she was past her limit". As a peripheral figure in this social grouping, I found myself confronted for the first time with the idea that teens don't necessarily associate knowledge or probability of danger with their own behaviour. It was a real-life incarnation of that "it can't happen to me" attitude I'd heard so much about. Adolescents may not believe they are invincible per se, but there is often some slippage between knowledge of risk and perception of risk for oneself

(Gerrard et al., 1996; Greene, Krcmar, Walters, Rubin & Hale, 2000). Adding this element to the discussion above, it becomes clear that there are a variety of cognitive processes through which adolescents manage their fear of the dangers involved in drinking alcohol. Essentially, each involves either a reduction in the perceived likelihood or magnitude of negative consequences, or an emphasis upon positive elements of drinking which eclipses fear and anxiety. It seems to me, however, that at root these processes involve a (re)figuration by the adolescent subject of the social character of alcohol, which carries in addition to risk an array of relevant meanings that shape the role of drinking in adolescent life. It has been suggested, in fact, that the underlying process through which youth evaluate their risk-taking behaviour within the contextual history of their selves and relationships is most fundamentally one of personal meaning (Levitt & Selman, 1996, 230). It is time, then, to peruse in greater depth the social character of alcohol, as the manner in which it is perceived and what it means to teens to drink seem salient to the role that this behaviour plays in their young lives. This, perhaps, will also shed further light on the tendency to emphasize the positives of drinking and disregard the negatives.

Of Character and Spirits

> *No liquid other than alcohol is freighted with such diverse expectations, comforts, fears, and hopes.* (Valverde, 1998, 1)

Valverde, writing about the tensions between drinking, freedom, and will, makes a powerful statement here regarding the polyvalent manner in meanings can be attached to alcohol in general. Indeed, this idea resonates within the context of underage

consumption as well. It has been demonstrated that adolescent expectancies about the effects and the social role of alcohol do not differ significantly from those of adults, in spite of nominal prescriptions against underage consumption (Schafer & Leigh, 1996, 408). These expectancies are developed early as well, so that usually at least a general framework of meaning is in place before the age when an individual is offered their first drink (Schafer & Leigh, 1996, 403; Williams & Ricciardelli, 1999, 557). I was fortunate enough to witness this process in action the other day, while having lunch with my extended family. Before ordering, my uncle leaned over to my cousin (age 5) and jokingly offered: "shall I order you a mug of beer?" My little cousin laughed hysterically, clearly familiar with this joke, having learned already that although beer was a beverage enjoyed by certain adults around her, it was *only* for adults. It will be interesting to observe how her ideas of drinking change as she grows older and is exposed to more cultural stimuli, both internal and external to the family, given that, according to relevant studies, her mental characterizations of alcohol will be tremendously important to her experience of it while underage – Glassner and Loughlin's interviews with youth, for instance, illustrate that the manner in which youth perceive, define and classify substances of intoxication has definite impacts on when and why they are consumed (1987, 83-84). Indeed, some research suggests that the way adolescents make meaning of their drinking may be the strongest construct among psychosocial competencies in predicting their actual drinking (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002). The social significance of alcohol is complex, however.

In spite of legal and nominal acceptance of drinking within North American society, our relationship with alcohol can more accurately be described as one of

tolerance. Consumption is permitted, but only within certain situations, in certain settings, and by certain people – provided that they behave themselves. This notion of tolerance is in fact quite an important one, as those individuals whose drinking is subject to the most disapproval and censure are those who are perceived as unable to "handle" liquor: alcoholics, children (and most especially those who are exposed while in the womb), and individuals engaging in violence or criminal activity while "under the influence". Drinking is desirable, recreational, but also is a vice, something which requires a certain fortitude of body and character to withstand. Tolerance, then, is also configured as a virtue relative to the inability to tolerate this source of intoxication. Here the rhetoric of underage youth "experimenting" with drinking behaviour seems most relevant: they have opportunities to partake in pleasurable intoxication, yet are faced with some uncertainty in terms of limits, both social and physiological. Ultimately, the message underpinning the mandate of "tolerance" seems one of "moderation", which ideally prevents individuals from exceeding certain limits of consumption and behaviour, which, while set normatively, are often highly personalized, depending on context, circumstance, and embodied experience. Restraint becomes a virtue as well, though the definitions of moderation, of course, vary. Witness, for instance, this excerpt of an email I received from a long-time friend:

> I'm gonna have to drink moderately while I'm down there [in California] I thikn [sic], just enough to keep a buzz without goin[g] overboard. (personal correspondence, November 14, 2004)

As my friend's note so eloquently reminds us, though, the pleasure of drinking resides in intoxication; in freedom and moving beyond the boundaries and limits of sobriety and the everyday. We are thus confronted with the tension at the heart of alcohol's social role: the potential to rupture social and experiential boundaries is itself strongly bounded and

regulated. It seems, therefore, that although there are a multiplicity of feelings and experiences that we feel call for a drink – and these do not differ greatly when comparing adolescents and adults (Schafer & Leigh, 1998, 408) – strong notions of both pleasure and danger are continually evoked by alcohol (Valverde, 1998, 1). It is this dissonant representation as both virtue and vice that constitutes the essence of alcohol as a social beverage. One can discern an echo here, as well, of the tensions inherent in constructions of alcohol as both risky and desirable for teens. Furthermore, the cultural nature of adolescence itself can only exacerbate this tension, as moral prescriptions against drinking collide with "teenage" values of hedonism and sensation-seeking.

There are a number of ways in which social emphasis on tolerance as a virtue is configured in terms of underage drinking. Firstly, the ability to "handle" alcohol is constructed as an adult trait, such that drinking becomes aligned with maturity (Miller et al., 2000, 80). The notion of drinking as "a part of growing up" or a "rite of passage" is certainly bound to this idea of maturity. When I turned 18, my brother and his friend took me out drinking and bought me all the drinks I desired, welcoming me into the world of adulthood and bar culture, of which I was now legally a member. Though it was not actually my first trip to the bar, the gesture was a nice one, and one that I've observed in many social networks as youth reach the legal age of consumption. The demonstrable mastery of alcohol, I found, was an asset in terms of social status as well, as it is a category of mature knowledge and experience which seemed empowering relative to others who "weren't there yet". The conceptual link between drinking and maturity is powerful, to be sure, and for adolescents liquor can be positively associated with independent, adult status (Walsh, 2001). Of course, underage drinking is also

paradoxically an expression of *immaturity*, and is strongly associated with ideas of recklessness, rebellion, escape and uncontrolled, irresponsible behaviour that oppose conventions of adulthood (Walsh, 2001). Perhaps this is one reason that drinking is able to assume a role of such prominence and significance during adolescence in spite of prohibitions – it becomes a personal and social positive for youth because its alignment with maturity does not forbid association with other values and ideals embraced by adolescent culture. Adolescence itself provides the cultural space in which youth may value both maturity and immaturity, and do so selectively as well.[2]

The ability to handle alcohol can also become a virtue in the literal sense, as it relates to toughness, fortitude and strength (Shaw, 2002, 105). Not only is this kind of tolerance understood as a social positive however, but the effects of drinking may actually enact toughness as well. To the extent that alcohol is understood to alleviate feelings of discomfort and fear, it may actually evoke toughness not only in terms of social representation, but cognitively as well (Rivers, 1994, 79). A special note must be made here regarding the link between toughness and gender, for the former is a trait that is often aligned with masculinity. Drinking is certainly infused with gendered expectations, as evidenced by the marked preference for beer among men and boys, one that is not mirrored among girls and women. Indeed, one study that compared drinking preferences internationally found that in every one of 22 countries examined, beer was the preferred beverage for males (Schmid, Ter Bogt, Godeau, Hublet, Dias & Fotiou, 2003, 659). Toughness, then, as a traditionally "masculine" virtue, is another way in which alcohol is entwined with gender identity. Drinking, and drinking a lot in

[2] Once again, I wish to remind readers that a more detailed, focused discussion of the role of adolescence and adolescent culture on drinking underage will follow in a subsequent chapter.

particular, allows boys to enact masculinity through demonstration of their ability to tolerate the effects of this illicit, "dangerous" intoxicant.

One of the most common characterizations of alcohol by either gender is that it functions as a kind of "social lubricant"; a tool to break down boundaries and inhibitions in order to promote or enhance sociability. Adolescents, like adults, perceive liquor as a powerful mood enhancer, causing relaxation, reduction of emotional tension, and the loosening of inhibitions (Cox, 1990, 117; Jaynes & Rugg, 1988, 5; Rivers, 1994, 133). As Maddox (1970) notes, however, drinking is constructed primarily as a social, interactive activity:

> Adolescents tend to perceive alcohol as a social beverage rather than as a drug; they tend to emphasize, in their descriptions of drinking and its consequences, what alcohol does for the drinker rather than what it does to him [sic]. (111)

Alcohol thus proves most desirable for youth in terms of its potential for social benefit through aiding interpersonal interaction, as an activity that one does with peers (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 70). Although it has been suggested by some studies that it is the belief that drinking reduces inhibitions that is responsible for much of the social relaxation attributed to the beverages themselves (Abrams & Wilson, 1977), lower inhibitions remains "one of the most strongly held expectancies" circulating among youth regarding alcohol (Cox, 1990, 217). In other words, we should take this metaphor of social lubrication seriously, as it is a quality with which alcohol is consistently imbued. I have numerous acquaintances who to this day will not dance or approach people they are attracted to in a bar before reaching a certain minimum level of intoxication. I myself have uttered the phrase "after two more drinks I'll be ready to dance." Implicit in cultural constructions of alcohol, therefore, is the notion that subjects may use it as a tool to

change the behaviour of themselves and others so that social interaction proceeds more smoothly. One of the elements of underage consumption, then, is a conscious commitment to a shared or group experience that exceeds or surpasses the possibilities offered by the interpersonal dynamics of the same group of individuals while sober. This can be read as a strategy of avoidance; a method of coping with the pressures and uncertainties of adolescent social life. After all, if alcohol is sought out as a social lubricant, then the implication is that sober interactions are more difficult and perhaps unpleasant, even among friends. Alternatively, however, one could emphasize the commitment to excitement and the extra-ordinary inherent in the valorization of social intoxication, which seems to mesh with stereotypical teenage values. I'm inclined to argue that both of these perspectives have merit, and that they are not mutually exclusive. In any case, it seems clear that the deliberate use of alcohol as a social lubricant is an important consideration for the study of underage drinking, particularly in light of research which suggests that the social dimensions of this behaviour are perceived by youth themselves as more important than the intrinsic qualities of the user's intoxication (e.g. Glassner & Loughlin, 1987; Orcutt, 1972). Here, too, we observe an emphasis upon positive, proactive constructions of drinking that excludes perceptions of risk or danger.

If we are to take seriously the apparent importance of the idea of "social lubrication" to underage individuals, then we must extend the metaphor into the sexual realm as well. Schafer and Leigh, in a (1996) comparison of meanings associated with alcohol by adults and adolescents, found that although the general structure of responses between the two groups was similar, there was an additional perceived benefit identified by adolescents: sexual expression. Indeed, these researchers remarked, "[i]t may be that

for adolescents, sex and alcohol have a more nearly unique and salient relationship than for adults" (407). Perhaps the teens surveyed were just more honest than the adults, as I'm inclined to believe that adults also commonly connect drinking with sexual disinhibition, particularly in bars and clubs or when dating. Perhaps this is simply a matter of emphasis, such that teens more readily identify sexuality as an important corollary of their drinking culture. In any case, it is important to note that youth expect alcohol will disinhibit them sexually (Brown, Goldman, Inn & Anderson, 1980; Cox, 1990; Jaynes & Rugg, 1988), and that this expectation must then play a factor in their conception of their drinking behaviours. I have witnessed, for example, female acquaintances who at 17 would proudly announce that they were drinking Lemon Gin, which they referred to as "panty remover." Similarly, I was once witness to an underage drinking party that involved teens rapidly and seemingly randomly "making out" with one another (irrespective of gender, it appeared, which was interesting). As the party wound down, two of the adolescents (one male and one female) were declared winners of the "slut contest", which was informal, and perhaps invented retrospectively at the very moment of declaring winners. These particular adolescents, then, were taking full advantage of the cultural/conceptual link between drinking and promiscuity. Though the physiological/pharmacological relationship between alcohol and sexuality is in fact complex, it is significant that the *expectation* of a simple, positive relationship between the two structures underage drinking experiences (Cox, 1990, 222).

Adolescents are confronted with alcohol as a polyvalent beverage whose influence upon their social interactions can operate in a number of powerful ways, according to its interpretation by the individual or group. There are many meanings at

play here; this has by no means been an exhaustive discussion. Alcohol's impact in terms of freedom and rebellion, for example, is no less important for many youth than are notions of tolerance or social ease. It seems clear, however, that teens themselves take on and reproduce common cultural constructions of alcohol, harnessing them in the context of specific (adolescent) values as drinking becomes a part of their social existence. The point, then, is that even though the messages, representations, and moralisms entwined with alcohol are complex and frequently dissonant, teens draw heavily and selectively upon this cultural cache to recreate a fairly narrow range of behaviours. Indeed, research has demonstrated that adolescents themselves consent to those explanations for their drinking that are readily available, such as "parents, school pressure, ...[so as to] temporarily escape" (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 50). The social identity of liquor is by no means fixed, though, as there seems to be little demand for individuals or groups to sustain a consistent idea of its character or implications. Understandings of alcohol and drinking tend to be muddy, shallow and unstable, as the emphases of a given individual or group can shift rapidly. This seems an appropriate moment to turn our attention to an important facet of alcohol's social interpretations that has been neglected to this point. I'm referring, of course, to...

Drunkenness

A conversation from 1998, during the second half of my grade 12 year:

Me: You going to the party tomorrow?

She: Nah. You?

Me: Yeah, I'll probly go.

She: You guys gonna get hammered?

Me: I dunno. I've gotta go ref the next morning, so probably I'll just have a couple.

She: Why bother?

Me: Huh?

She: What's the point of drinking at all if you're not getting drunk?

The social, interactional role of alcohol is certainly significant, but, as this conversation with my good friend reminds us, teens value drunkenness as well. We cannot ignore the conscious desire to get smashed: "drunkenness for its own sake and simply the expressed desire to drink were found to be goals in themselves, without any special explanations or mention of perceived consequences" (Palmqvist et al., 2003, 201). Intoxication must be configured by many adolescents as a positive, since they continue to drink illegally despite powerful moral disapproval of excessive drinking that is evident within the cultural rhetoric to which they are exposed (Becker, 1967, 164; Midanik, 2003, 1287). No one seems to like drunk people, yet many people like to be drunk. In this case we are confronted with the simplest explanation: adolescents identify drunkenness as a positive end in itself because of the "pleasurable effects of stopping some of our neurons from working" (Rivers, 1994, 78). Whether the subject is expecting euphoric sensation (a "buzz" or "high"), or the alleviation of negative feelings (pain, anxiety, guilt etc.), the understanding is that intoxication will liberate and elevate. Certainly alcohol has the potential to intensify certain negative feelings as well, such as anger or sadness, but these are mere possibilities for most, and unlikely to be conceived as goals of intoxication.

However, these potential negatives may be influential in the minds of abstainers, who might cite reasons such as "whenever I get drunk I fight" or "drinking will just make me more depressed."

Drunkenness seems to bear some predictability in terms of its manifestations and the behaviours it can inspire, yet at the same time it is a vague, subjective concept that receives little scrutiny. It seems strange that most people are unwilling or unable to describe the experience of intoxication with any degree of specificity, referring instead to vague descriptors which function as synonyms: "buzzed", "wasted", "hammered", etc. Everyone who has been drunk supposedly "knows" what it feels like, but there seems to be no imperative to qualify that knowledge. Descriptions and comparisons more commonly refer to the behaviour of intoxicated individuals, rather than their subjective experience per se. So, although drunkenness is to a large extent universalized and "understood" by those who believe they have experienced it, we have little phenomenological knowledge of it. This can be attributed in part to the fact that, as noted above, alcohol tends to be perceived in terms of its social and behavioural consequences, rather than its intrinsic effects. Also, the state of intoxication itself no doubt inhibits cogent, specific accounts. Finally, it has been suggested that perhaps the reason it is so difficult and rare in our culture to discuss the positive side of drunkenness in any depth is that the discourse of intoxication is dominated by negativity (Levine, 1981, 1051). After all, the goal of an artificially induced change in consciousness is often labelled as immoral (Becker, 1967; Midanik, 2003) as it establishes a relationship with the everyday world of denial, flight or escape.

In spite of the vague characterizations to which drunkenness is subject, experiences and expressions of intoxication are shaped and regulated to a significant extent by social interactions. How is it possible that a substance like alcohol, which is understood to lower inhibitions and liberate individuals from social restraints, should produce such a narrow range of behaviours among the intoxicated? Why is it that the drunk, disinhibited individual engages in only certain kinds of "out of control" behaviour, rather than speaking in tongues, for example, or picking their nose, or peeling an ugly shade of paint from the walls? As Orcutt (1972) has noted, intoxicated individuals are clearly "under the influence" of certain social and normative expectations, in addition to the substance of intoxication (245). Indeed, what one learns about drunkenness, often through unconscious or half-conscious social and cultural cues, profoundly shapes the experience (Levine, 1981, 1050). This notion is not a new one; in 1969, researchers MacAndrew and Edgerton published a landmark book entitled *Drunken Comportment: A Social Explanation*, described above, which addressed this very issue. In this work, the authors examined extensive anthropological evidence from cultures in which the norms and expectations with respect to drunkenness diverge considerably from mainstream Western custom, and also from one another. The logical conclusion suggested by this evidence was that those elements of drunken comportment that we tend to assume are intrinsic and directly caused by alcohol (such as social disinhibition, sexual and physical aggression, and boisterous behaviour) are in fact merely *possible* effects, subject to heavy cultural regulation:

> in and of itself, the presence of alcohol in the body does not necessarily even conduce to disinhibition, much less inevitably produce such an effect...Over the course of socialization, people learn about drunkenness what their society "knows" about drunkenness; and, accepting and acting

> upon the understandings thus imparted to them, they become living confirmation of their society's teachings. (87-88)

There are always limits beyond which most drunk individuals will not go, and these socially defined boundaries persist in spite of any expected or desired disinhibition (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, 67).

Are teens thus doomed to mimic drunkenness observed, or to reproduce the behaviours of those who've gone before? It seems so, for the most part, but this is too clean and simple an explanation for our purposes, and it deserves some scrutiny. After all, to suggest that there is nothing that is truly liberating or out of control about drunkenness seems ridiculously counterintuitive. Firstly, it seems important to reiterate the role of *expectation* in the experience of intoxication, as the symptoms and behaviours that are understood to be associated with drinking will likely manifest (Cox, 1990, 218). Indeed, at least one other study has explicitly demonstrated that expectation and/or social reinforcement of drunken or sober behaviour, respectively, can produce the intended behaviour, even where no actual alcohol is administered (Zack & Vogel-Sprott, 1997). Cultural knowledge and social environment are thus strongly implicated, yet this does not mean that all drunk youth are simply following a script, without agency or innovation. It seems that there is a gradient of expectations about drunken behaviour, so that "it may be misleading to think in terms of a culture having a single set of norms for this cultural 'time out'" (Room, 2001, 193). Of course, the quantity of alcohol consumed is an element which impacts the expectations and experience of intoxication (Room, 2001, 193), as are the particular social setting, the people involved, and the range of personal and psychological factors at play in a given environment at a given time. The age of the participants must be considered as well, for adolescents are subject to different

expectations than, for example, a group of business people at a fashionable lounge downtown (Zack & Vogel-Sprott, 1997, 500). However, all of these elements operate within a sociocultural milieu that structures drunkenness itself through prescriptive guidelines for behaviour, and thus reduces pathological reactions to intoxication (Mizruchi & Perruchi, 1970). Of course, no one would make the argument that drunkenness is wholly constituted by the social role of alcohol; we cannot ignore the pharmacological forces at play. Drinking alcohol, after all, is not like drinking water, even though it is possible to produce drunken behaviour in its absence, as noted above. Alcohol obviously has a number of effects upon the body, including sensorimotor impairment and a change in cognitive functioning (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, 169-170). Perhaps, then, liquor consumption establishes a certain chemical readiness; an altered state of consciousness that works in concert with social cues to increase the likelihood of enacting cultural prescriptions about drunkenness (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, 168; Orcutt, 1978, 393). This seems the most likely interpretation.

The Drinker

Heard at a party:

"How you doin' bro?"

"Halfway there. It's hittin' my head a little now."

"Yeah, well you must be messed up. You look like shit, dude."

"Who cares, man? I feel fine."

...

"What's with those guys?"

"Them? Playin' century. One shot a minute for 100 minutes. Last man standing."

"Wow, that's like a timed lobotomy or something. They'll be *done* before the CD ends!"

"They use beer so it lasts longer."

...

"You should totally go talk to her. Now's your perfect chance for sure!"

"Fuck that, man – you're always pushing that shit on me when I'm hammered!"

"So what? Where's the bad? Even if you went over there and totally made an ass of yourself, she proly wouldn't even remember! And what if she's into you?"

...

"No, give it a fuckin' rest! I don't care what she said yesterday! Why d'ya always hafta be such a bitch at parties?

"Hey, I'm just sayin'! You better wake the fuck up and – "

"I don't wanna hear it, OK? Go have another drink or something."

"Looks to me like *you* could use it more than I could."

"Ooh, snappy comeback. Twat."

...

"...so she was totally blasted, right, like *gone*, but it was only like 5th period and we were gonna mix this rye into a 2-litre of Dr. Pepper, right, to bring with us after school – "

"Hey, is that my last beer, asshole?"

"What? Oh, yy-maybe, who cares, man? Where the hell was I – Oh yeah, so we couldn't take her into the guys can with us or nothin', so Raj draws this big dot on some kid's locker, and tells her to just stare at it while we do our thing and she totally does it! I mean, she's comp-*letely lost* in this freakin' dot for like ten minutes! Out of her mind!

...

"Hey."

"Hey."

"So uh...I totally love that shirt."

"Oh. Thanks."

"I uh...I think you're pretty cool, you know."

"Whatever."

"Like for real. I'm not just saying that."

"Uh, OK. Fine. I'm gonna go get another drink."

...

"Hey man, you know Tracy's friend, the Asian chick with the boots?"

"What, Alice? I think so. The stuck up chick?"

"Nah, man, she's just shy or something. Amazing though. I can't stop thinkin' about her."

"No kidding?"

"I have dreams about her, man."

"Uhhh...too much info dude."

...

"She didn't mean that."

"Fuckin' rights she did."

"C'mon, she's just drunk. She hasn't made any sense in an hour. Forget about it."

"No, no way. She for sure meant it. I know she did."

"Well, then she'll probly call you tomorrow all repenty. Just chill out. Here, try this."

...

"Hey, anyone for strip poker?"

"You got cards?"

(Ir)responsible

Let us consider drunkenness a little further. In fact, I would like at this point to devote some attention to the way in which intoxication is spoken of, as this will unveil a number of issues with respect to the adolescent subject, the adolescent drinker.

"Language, culture, and action constitute a continuous process of mutual influence" (Miller et al., 2000, 73), and thus it becomes important to consider what insight can be divined from speech about drunkenness. Even synonyms for "drunk" can be read as data on the meanings of intoxication in North American culture (Levine, 1981, 1038). In fact, an article published more than two decades ago entitled *The Vocabulary of Drunkenness* (1981) attempted to pioneer academic dialogue about this very subject through a study of the language of an experience of drinking. Unfortunately, few subsequent research projects have pursued the implications of this line of thought, yet Levine's commentary is worth revisiting. Let us wallow in his candid prose for a moment:

> It is striking that so many of the American synonyms of *drunk* suggest some kind of power, force or violence, often used to describe good times…These are not at all inherently derogatory terms, and often they are used to describe pleasurable occasions. (1038-1039)
>
> The forceful and violent words imply that something is smashed, wiped out, buried, and so on. I suggest that that something might be thought of as ordinary or everyday consciousness and experience. Leaving the ordinary consciousness of everyday life requires considerable force – it is not easy to do – and in some profound (but recognizable) way it is experienced as the destruction of something. (1039)
>
> In short, part of the pleasure of drunkenness is the pleasure involve[sic] in destroying everyday consciousness. (1039)

A violence is clearly invoked in our common linguistic constructions of drunkenness (e.g., smashed, wasted, plastered, etc.); every casual description figures drinking as a chemical assault on the self. As Levine suggests, the drinker is attacking the consciousness or cognitive experience of the everyday self, or at the very least attempting to overcome some of the inhibitions binding that self into certain social roles. There is, therefore, a conceptual break with the sober social identity of the subject as well, because

both the drinker and their audience work to (re)enforce the idea of a change in the drinking individual; as we have seen, expectation and context play a large role.

Extending this line of thought, we might fruitfully ask: what social consequences does this rupture of the everyday self have for the adolescent drinker, and for drinkers in general? This is not merely an issue of language, of course, but of subjectivity as well. Issues of responsibility leap immediately to mind, as the most obvious effect of a perceived change in the drinking subject is a corresponding change in behaviours that are allowed or disallowed, encouraged or discouraged. Intoxication and intoxicated behaviour are often shielded from the ascription of individual and social guilt, for instance (Rivers, 1994, 79; Shaw, 2002, 12), according to the logic that responsibility cannot be understood in the same way once the break with the everyday self has occurred. This conception of the drinking subject was eloquently articulated in 1962 by C. Nelson Davis, who was at the time the Psychiatrist-in-chief of the Malvern Institute for Psychiatric and Alcoholic Studies, and it remains strong today:

> Man minus alcohol equals a normally disciplined person. When alcohol is added, you change the behaviour pattern...There is a myth that man plus alcohol equals the true person. Nothing could be further from the truth. To be your real self you must have control of all your faculties. Alcohol removes the power of control over behaviour. (qtd in MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, 10)

If the drinking subject can be read as other than their true or real self while intoxicated, then it becomes possible to dismiss bad behaviour as episodic and unintended, and thus it need not be taken as seriously by the drinker or others in attendance (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, 169). The moral character of the intoxicated individual remains insulated from harsh judgement, because it is understood that "a true test of ability and intentions is not possible except under conditions of sobriety" (Cox, 1990, 226).

Therefore, we are neither surprised nor dismayed by most drunken behaviour, as it is excused by its very state of inebriation:

> For a while – but just for a while – the rules (or, more accurately, *some* of the rules) are set aside, and the drunkard finds himself [sic], if not beyond good and evil, at least partially removed from the accountability nexus in which [s/]he normally operates. (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, 89-90)

Alcohol, then, is not only responsible for this suspension of the rules of good behaviour, but also *it* and not the subject per se becomes culpable for any wrongs, embarrassments, and errors in judgement committed while under the influence, according to this perspective. In other words, "[i]t seems that a model of drunken comportment as akin to possession is usually a model for explaining extreme and otherwise uninterpretable drunken behaviour," such that, while intoxicated, it is booze and not the self that is in control (Room, 2001, 194). Of course, this particular view of drinking and culpability need not enforce a rigid dichotomy of sober-responsible/drunk-irresponsible; the break with the everyday self is neither immediate nor irrevocable, and individuals move along a continuum of inebriation and vulnerability to judgement. Nevertheless, a curious relationship to responsibility is established according to the conception of drunkenness as a break with the everyday self.

The notion that drinking diminishes culpability is pervasive and powerful, yet this perspective does not tell the whole story. Are these individuals not responsible for choosing to get drunk in the first place, for instance? Shouldn't they then be held accountable for their actions while drinking? Of course, we know that drinkers *are* held responsible for certain behaviours, at certain times, inebriation notwithstanding. Part of the reason for this is the existence of another strand of cultural rhetoric that directly opposes the view that drinking subject are something other than themselves. This view is

in fact the very "myth" to which C. Nelson Davis referred in his polemical statements above: the belief that alcohol liberates or unveils the true or genuine self by virtue of its powers of disinhibition (whether chemical or psycho-social). According to this perspective, drunkenness entails a dearth of self-consciousness and self-control, and so the impulses and actions of drunk individuals are freed from the fear of censure or judgement; they are the truest, most direct and accurate expressions of the drinker's character. Attached to this conception is the idea that drinking allows one to share their deepest, most intimate feelings while insulated by inebriation (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002). The emergence of the genuine self thus inverts the notion that alcohol distances subjects from their core self, though both perspectives share the premise that intoxication profoundly impacts social identity. Emphasis upon the unhindered, "true" self locates culpability for bad behaviour at the heart of one's genuine moral character.

It seems that the relationship between alcohol and responsibility is by no means simple, nor even consistent. There is actually a considerable degree of variation in the interpretation of drunken behaviour, as there is no monolithic cultural understanding of the relationship between drink, drinker and drunken (mis)behaviour (Room, 2001). Actions that are perceived as acceptable during intoxication "may be highly idiosyncratic, depending upon the social group considered, and the individual's unique experiential history" (Cox, 1990, 240). Clearly, then, complex interpretations and judgement of inebriation occur not only concurrent to the drunkenness itself, but in hindsight as well (Room, 2001, 194). Consider, for instance, the flexibility available to both subject and audience in framing hurtful comments, minor misdeeds, or embarrassing moments occurring during inebriation. Were these "intentional" acts, for which a person can be

held accountable? *Sometimes* seems to be the answer. Responsibility thus rests to a certain degree in the eye of the beholder, but even this is not an ironclad interpretation. Compare the freedom of judgement for minor transgressions to an act such as drunk driving, for instance, in contemporary North America. Drunk driving is not subject to such equivocation, however inebriated the individual may be at the moment of choosing to start the vehicle. A break with the everyday self and sober judgement is deemed insufficient as an excuse for this act of reckless endangerment, both legally and morally – particularly when someone is injured or killed as a result of another's vehicular irresponsibility. Even when hammered, we should know better. The difference here is not reducible to the seriousness of the incident or the potential for harm, however. Consider a bar fight: violence ensues among inebriated patrons with the potential to seriously injure or even kill the participants, yet there may be no legal or social censure whatsoever. If such a fight were to occur at work, however, under conditions of sobriety, negative repercussions are far more likely. In some situations, therefore, there exists a certain cultural flexibility which permits responsibility to be deferred, or not, according to a plethora of personal and social variables and a selective appeal to particular conceptions of the drinking subject. Certain actions, however, such as drunk driving or sexual assault, are culturally bound to a far more limited range of interpretation within contemporary North American life.

Our social treatment of drinking and responsibility appears inconsistent, idiosyncratic, selective, and even paradoxical or hypocritical. Yet one thing remains clear: the moral character of the drinker is always charged, fluid. Inebriated subjects are not and perhaps can not be judged in the same light as when they are sober, because they

themselves are read differently; their social identities shift. Of course, this is especially true when judgements are tied to the idea that drinking itself is an immoral, irresponsible act, a notion which is even more prevalent among interpretations of underage drinkers, who are nominally understood as irresponsible anyway. In this light, the idea of youth drinking "responsibly" makes no sense whatsoever. However, even for those who are unwilling to condemn all underage drinking as immoral, the question of responsibility remains. What behaviour, what level of drunkenness or disinhibition can be deemed "responsible"? We must ask: is the cultural imperative to drink "responsibly" a coherent, or even possible goal? It seems to entail judging individuals and their actions according to the standards of everyday sobriety, when in fact the intoxicated are perceived as fundamentally changed, and are subject to fickle standards of accountability, as we have seen. I am therefore willing to condemn the pervasive imperative "drink responsibly" as ridiculous, or at best misleading, as its actual message seems to be "drink, but not to the point where you'll do anything stupid", or perhaps the snappier "drink, but don't get drunk." It is a curious message, to be sure, and yet another instance of the deceptive complexity and inconsistency of the social relationship between alcohol and accountability. Drinking, after all, enacts a conscious departure from sober, everyday existence – perhaps there is something inherently irresponsible about alcohol if its social purpose is to surpass the roles, experiences and boundaries of "normal" life. And yet these departures are ultimately temporary, thus it is understandably difficult to incorporate this behaviour into the sober world in which we exist most of the time. Finally, it seems clear that our conceptions of culpability seem for the most part limited to the drinker and disinhibition, often excluding the social, interactive and cultural

elements of drunken comportment discussed in the previous chapter from the realm of responsibility. These dimensions of drinking and drunken behaviour would seem to demand a broader, more nuanced perspective on the issue of accountability than the one(s) that actually manifest(s). Even so, however, black and white declarations of guilt or innocence are seemingly confounded within the bleary realm of inebriation.

Identification Please

The purchase or consumption of alcohol requires identification, at least in theory. Adult status must be proven upon request, as we place very strong legal and cultural emphasis on the dichotomy of legitimate and illegitimate drinkers, of those who can and can not partake. Underage drinkers have no such identification, of course (or if they do, it's fake), and so it would seem at first glance that this drinker/non-drinker division is for them largely irrelevant – official boundaries are not their concern, since they are all nominally non-drinkers, yet they may transgress this role at will. However, as anyone who can recall their teen years will tell you, the *social* division between drinker and abstainer, rather than the legal one, is extremely prominent. The identification with one side or the other is a personal and social move of tremendous significance, as "preoccupation with identity issues" and "social images of drinkers" are common among adolescents (Blanton et al., 1997, 272-273). We might wonder briefly why it is that the identity of "drinker" or "non-drinker" carries so much importance, whereas divisions based on preferred type of alcohol, comportment while drinking, or the frequency or quantity of alcohol consumed seem far less prominent. Upon further contemplation however, one notes that these measures based upon quantity of consumption or

qualitative differences in behaviour are far more fickle and transient. Whether one drinks at all, on the other hand, is a visible fragment of identity with the appearance of consistency and stability, notwithstanding the fact that most youth move at some point from abstinence to some level of consumption. Further, the very act of drinking underage is one of deviance or transgression, and involves a necessary shift in self- and social identification to incorporate this new aspect of personality. Indeed, deviant actions among youth are very significant in terms of social identity, character, and the expectations that result from perceptions thereof (Alexander & Campbell, 1968, 368). Use of illicit substances such as alcohol and drugs is a key signifier that permits youth to locate and manifest themselves along a continuum of deviance, a move of profound relevance at this time in their lives (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 130). The status of "drinker" or "non-drinker" is therefore a label of considerable consequence in terms of the manner in which identity is negotiated.

Of course, this one facet of identity is not manipulated in isolation; we have seen how issues of meaning and the social role of alcohol can affect the actions and perceptions of youth, and we will later embark upon a closer examination how drinking affects social dynamics among teens. However, for the time being it is important to note that other "identities" can, but need not necessarily, shape one's social status relative to alcohol, and the social reception of the drinker/abstainer label. After all, specific deviant identities must exist within the larger formulations and perceptions of individuals' social persona(s): "beliefs about drug use fit with the broader problems and projects of these persons' lives" (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 127). For instance, adolescents who identify as competitive athletes, dedicated students, rebels, or members of a particular religious

congregation may refer to these overlapping identity concerns as the root of their status vis-à-vis drinking. Drinking behaviour, after all, may at times require justification (Alexander & Campbell, 1968), whether internal or upon request. In my experience, teens are often asked by peers why it is that they do or do not drink, especially if they are stubborn abstainers. Assertive refusers, it has been suggested, are commonly perceived as offensive and unlikeable by those who partake (Wildman, 1986), and this I believe constitutes a part of the reason for the emergence of dialogue, conflict, and the need for justification between drinkers and abstainers. Appealing to other elements and/or signifiers of identity permits many adolescents to establish and demonstrate a degree of coherence and continuity within their (developing) selves. In sum, it seems clear that identity qua underage drinking carries profound social and personal relevance, though the status of drinker or non-drinker can hardly emerge spontaneously, independent of other aspects of character and social interaction.

The significance of identity issues among underage drinkers is not limited to considerations of deviance, social status, and labels. There are broader concerns as well for the adolescent subject in terms of development and the self. Drinking, as I've outlined above, entails a deliberate departure from the everyday self and the ordinary realm of experience. As Lightfoot has noted, in all likelihood "an adolescent will not be made to answer the question: Was that your *real* self, or were you just *acting* that way because you were drunk?" (1997, 103, emphasis in original). At the same time, however, alcohol can certainly be a catalyst for identity metastasis beyond the level of labels and visible (self-)identification. Indeed, the interactions between conceptions of alcohol as a potent change agent and adolescents' self-concepts are crucial to understanding the role of liquor

in their personal and social worlds (Towberman & McDonald, 1993). The dynamics of behaviour, social character and self-concept affected by the use of alcohol enact development of the self; the boundaries of one's experience, behaviour, interactions, persona – and thus the limits of the self – are necessarily pushed in new directions. Experimentation with alcohol, then, can be read as part of a more generalized tendency among teens to affect new identities, meaning that adolescent drinking involves not only curiosity about the effects of the substance, but also a "desire to explore the social consequences of becoming someone who drinks" (Blanton et al., 1997, 272). In fact, Blanton and colleagues are willing to push this notion even further: "it seems likely that experimentation with this particular behaviour would be a central part of most young people's overall identity search" (272). Whether central or not, however, alcohol use enhances one's latitude for self-expression (Cox, 1990), and provides opportunities for novel social and personal experience – indeed, for novel experiences *of* the social and the self. This perspective seems to involve a curious conflict with conventional thinking, which locates alcohol in opposition to personal development and self-awareness (see, e.g., Pagliaro & Pagliaro, 1996). However, the dissonance can be resolved: although it seems sensible to acknowledge that in a given situation drinking shields subjects to some extent from self-awareness, and may involve a perceived devolution in their behaviour and functioning, the overall result is also developmental in that it introduces novel social roles, interactions and experiences among youth that impact the horizons of identity. This involves both subjective and social shifts in identity, which of course are mediated not only by interpersonal interactions, but by the context(s) of meanings discussed above in which individuals must negotiate these issues of identity and alcohol use.

The evident significance of self-concept and social status to the adolescent drinker raises the inevitable question of the relationship of these issues to that tiresome buzzword of our day: self-esteem. The association between substance use and self-esteem seems to be a comfortable one for many people: "it is intuitively appealing and persists in the literature" as well as in popular discourse (Moore & Laflin, 1996, 523). But is there any actual relationship between underage drinking and perceived self-worth? Research to date has failed to articulate any clear, simple connection (Jones & Heaven, 1998; Moore & Laflin, 1996), and even where significant relationships have been found, they often explain very little of the variance in behaviours (Orcutt, 1972). Moore and Laflin strongly articulate this growing doubt among researchers:

> repeated failure to obtain statistically significant relationships between SE [self-esteem] and alcohol or drug use, especially one that accounts for meaningful amounts of variance, calls into question the utility of explaining alcohol and drug use in terms of SE. (534)

There may be different consequences of self-esteem among boys and girls in terms of alcohol use (Epstein, Griffin & Botvin, 2004; Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope & Dielman, 1997). One study has also suggested that cross-sectional studies of these variables may be less effective than a focus upon self-esteem trajectories as adolescents age (Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope & Dielman, 1997). Overall, it seems that research to date has failed to adequately articulate the relationship between drinking and self-worth, a fact which may be due to methodological shortcomings, such as the difficulty in operationalizing self-esteem (Schroeder, Laflin & Weis, 1993). The more interesting question thus becomes: why does the intuitive connection between the two persist at all? It seems tied to the notion that teens drink because they feel bad about themselves or have trouble coping with anxieties in their lives, but is this really the case? Perhaps for some,

yet the analysis to this point seems to indicate that the meanings and motivations related to underage drinking are much too complex to limit causal thinking to such a broad, nebulous conception, however comfortable the image of depressed, anxious teens drinking to cope may be amidst contemporary self-esteem rhetoric.

On Liberation and Control

After his first drink, he suggested they all head down to The Bluff, and they all agreed, for once. He could see some of his own concerns mirrored in the eyes of others: Lianne's music was all terrible, her two little poodles were pestering everyone (and they smelled bad), no one had anything to say, and it was anyone's guess how her parents would react to the five of them drinking when they got home from the theatre. A change of scenery was in order – plus, it was always better to have somewhere to *go*, something to *do*, instead of just sitting around drinking and talking like always.

He was glad to go, glad they agreed, glad to help pile bottles and ice and freezies into the cooler into the car into the night air with all the windows down and blasts of sight and smell fighting with radio commercials to fill gaps in the conversation. It was a short drive, but refreshing, to the field by the school that ran flat out past the goal posts and the footpath and then plunged down into the river valley. The Bluff, it was called, and it was their favourite spot – a good view, deserted, familiar.

After his second drink, they were sprawled out on their blanket and things were going better. Everyone seemed more comfortable, the

conversation was delightfully random, and out here in the shadows he didn't have to worry about how his hair looked, or the fact that his jeans didn't quite reach the tops of his shoes, even standing. And he was lying close enough to see how Lianne's shirt didn't quite reach the top of her jeans. Her beautiful toes curled and uncurled fitfully in the cool grass.

After his third drink, he found himself protesting once again against his nickname. They called him Juice, short for Brown Juice, for no apparent reason. There weren't many brown kids at their school, but it still made no sense, and reminded him of chewing tobacco. His protests were half-hearted by now; he knew the nickname was here to stay, and he didn't really mind it most of the time when he was sober. So they launched into a diatribe on the essential grossness of people who spit.

After his fourth drink, he had to remind himself to slow down. They hadn't been out very long, and he was already a full beer ahead of Pat, who was practically an alcoholic. He wanted to be careful, tonight, because Lianne was there, and also because he got drunk too quickly sometimes, let go too soon. It was all about timing, he'd learned; if you could just manage your buzz until everyone reached that threshold, then you didn't have to worry about missteps, quick words or mocking, and then –

Then you could all just fly together, infused and undone, off into the night leaving back in ashes all the clutter at the edges – the car is a missile and the stereo sees tomorrow and all the neon lights are fireworks clapping while headlights flit by like tracer fire.

After his fifth drink he had to visit the bushes briefly, taking care not to stumble down the slope. Then he told a joke that fell flat, because he'd forgotten that he'd told it to these same friends before. And recently. They wouldn't hold it against him, he didn't think. He was really good at telling jokes, and was always bringing them new ones from his work.

After his sixth drink he said something that was positively brilliant, and most of them got it, too. Jien was momentarily floored by his genius, and asked him why it was that he didn't talk more at school. Pat slapped him on the knee, said he loved it when they drank together. He was a riot on the bottle, according to Cali. Lianne was driving and so wasn't really drinking. She smiled without meeting his eyes, and lay back to look at the stars.

After his seventh drink there isn't much he can remember.

We are all familiar with the idea of drinking as an escape; a mechanism of coping or flight for those who find they must evade the "real world", for a time at least. Stereotypical wisdom tells us that one of the reasons that people use intoxicating substances because they simply can't deal with reality (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 49), and so they seek to avoid the demands, discomforts, or anxieties of a given situation chemically. However, we must ask if this pervasive figuration of alcohol use is at all fruitful or applicable to the study of underage drinking. As with most stereotypes, there is probably some truth to this one; after all, inebriation often entails a deliberate departure from the everyday, as we have seen. It may be overly reductive, though, to depict this behaviour as escapist, given that this conception invokes a weakness, inability or

desperation within the subject which need not exist; escapism cannot be the only element involved. Consider how one's entire outlook on the issue shifts by loosening or discarding such assumptions; for instance, what if the word *escape* is substituted for other terms in characterizing inebriation as a break with everyday reality and the self? Underage drinking and underage drinkers are figured quite differently if *escape* becomes *vacation*, *time-out*, *empowerment*, *metamorphosis*, *refuge*, *liberation*, *(de/re)formation*, *augmentation*, *(d/r)evolution* or *solace*. We need not limit our perspective to one such standpoint, particularly because youth themselves do not.

In any case, it certainly seems that whether drinking is perceived and enacted as a mode of liberation or refuge, it has profound implications for the subject as an issue of power and control. On one hand, the drinker is exercising literal control over the self and the personal experience of the world. Intoxication can thus be read as a deliberate effort to achieve a particular kind of (improved) feeling or subjective state; an end that is realizable, even if little else seems to be within one's power (Jaynes & Rugg, 1988, 15). This perspective would seem to locate drinking as an ultimately selfish, self-involved activity, though there are obviously significant social dimensions as well. In this light, the increased emphasis among youth in recent decades on drinking as an end in itself can be linked to rising cultural individualism, which encourages a preoccupation with subjectivity and personal concerns (Palmqvist et al., 2003, 201). Whether seeking solace or sensation, the drinker is engaged in an enterprise of personal manipulation and management that renders control as a central concern.

Of course, there is a much more prominent facet of the relationship between intoxication and control, and it is that inebriation engenders a loss or sacrifice of personal

control. As noted above, disinhibition is a powerful sociocultural imperative – though not necessarily a chemical one – with respect alcohol consumption. It seems, then, that the act of drinking, though it may entail deliberate action and subjective agency, is also paradoxically a behaviour that aims to impair control, to make the subject "out of control". As Valverde (1998) has aptly remarked, "people begin drinking, supposedly, of their own will, which is the very thing that is eroded as they drink" (2). Indeed, this notion of personal control or will(power) has for centuries been aligned against drinking and intoxication in public discourse (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002; Valverde, 1998). Control itself is a polyvalent idea, invoking concerns with physiological response, sensorimotor impairment, decision-making, cognition, and disinhibited behaviour (Midanik, 2003, 1295). However the idea may be applied, though, the cultural message is clear: drinking and intoxication are acceptable – or even positive – so long as the individual remains "in control" (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 49; Valverde, 1998, 173); so long as the will remains ultimately ascendant over impulse so that damage or offence is minimal. Similar to our cultural emphasis on tolerance, the imperative to control takes on special significance in the case of underage drinking. Often, teenage alcohol use is a subject of special concern because, supposedly, "skills of self control are not yet fully developed" among youth (Palmqvist et al., 2003, 195). Personally, I'm uncomfortable tying the ability to self-control to age, as I could furnish numerous examples from my own life of adults who consistently demonstrate far less self-control than my 17-year old brother and his friends. More likely, the particular concern engendered by underage use can be tied to a lesser imperative and/or expectation of self-control experienced by some individuals during adolescence, together with a cultural perception of greater unwillingness among

youth to accept control as a virtue. In fact, the culture of adolescence, which will be the subject of the next chapter, structures the relationship of subjects to alcohol, the self, and self-control in a number of important ways, the analysis of which will further texture our understanding of these issues. For the time being, however, we should remark that control is a central concern of the drinker, who is both motivated and compelled to demonstrate mastery of the self through drinking, even as alcohol concurrently erodes the ability to do so.

This issue of restraint and mastery of the self is extremely salient to the young drinker, not only in terms of the idiosyncrasies of behaviour on particular occasions, but also in a broader, more general sense. Alcoholism, as the ultimate extension of the self-control preoccupation, is a major concern for adolescents as they begin to incorporate alcohol into their social lives, depending on the strength of the role played by drinking. Glassner and Loughlin, for example, suggest that "the most far-reaching loss of control feared by heavy users is addiction" based upon their qualitative interview data (1987, 53). Fear and anxiety about drinking habits can therefore center around the issue of self-control, in the long-term. After all, as Cox (1990) notes,

> If drunken behaviour is not regarded as a true reflection of oneself and the drinker is treated with greater tolerance than when sober, then the reinforcing potential of drinking is indeed considerable (227).

Given that drinking and drunkenness are constructed and reinforced as social and experiential positives for many teens, escalations in frequency of quantity of consumption are to be expected at times, yet these are also cast beneath the shadow of dependence, of a consistent inability to control oneself. "Controllability," of course, lacks an objective referent, and is often defined through interaction with others and experimentation, and so there exists for some youth a great deal of anxiety over the ability of themselves and their

peers to manage drinking behaviour within the wider context of their lives (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 52). Further, different individuals perceive the relationship between alcohol and control differently, just as they might have different notions of when drinkers are or are not responsible. In fact, one recent study conducted an analysis of the linguistic and thematic manner in which youth conceptualize issues of control and substance use (Miller et al., 2000, 77-88). Individuals who evidenced higher-risk for substance use problems, they found, tended to have positive expectations about use and framed it as an issue of choice over which they had complete control. On the other hand, those in the low-risk group tended to relate substance use to a surrendering or loss of control. It seems, then, that drinking behaviour may be strongly linked to the perception of individuals that they can maintain control over their choices and actions, on a given occasion as well as in the long-term. Interestingly, it has also been suggested that the preoccupation with control in this context is associated with lower actual levels of cognitive self-control, and that trying harder to exert restraint predicts greater instability of subsequent behaviour (Williams & Ricciardelli, 1999, 558-563). We should not lose sight of the fact that "admonitions about control", whether internal or external, are only one factor in the decisions and conceptualizations among youth with respect to alcohol, and "must compete with the lure of enhancing one's reputation by taking risks" (Williams & Ricciardelli, 1999, 558), among other factors. For example, I wonder what link could be discerned between an individual's treatment of responsibility and their understanding of restraint and drinking. In any case, it seems clear that there are a number of interconnected concerns for the underage drinker in terms of identity, the self, and control that underpin the relationship of the subject to alcohol. Tension and ambiguity again

seem to be the rule; it seems that clean, concise formulations of underage drinking or the adolescent drinker are confounded by the intricacy and variability of the elements at stake.

Adolescent

We're just about to leave when this mall security guy strafes our table, lashing out with a dirty glance and a sharp command about loitering as he passes by, shoulders tense. You know the type: glasses, probably flunked out of the police academy, likes uniforms, giving orders and acting tough, but really he's too chickenshit to even stand and look us in the eyes while he's telling us to leave. Which we were about to do anyway.

And so we settle in and lounge for another 10 minutes or so, while Mr. Security is off bullying some little kids who are running by the fountain. Then, when he's just started to head in our direction again, we get up slowly with our empty cups, still chatting, and file right past him, close enough to elbow the little bastard in the teeth. He knows we're messing with him, but he waits until we're past to fire one at our backs:

"Fucking goddamn kids."

The four of us halt and spin immediately, and the rage in our eyes actually makes him flinch. Brett takes a step back towards him, which makes him shrink a little more, and delivers our comeback in a deep, booming voice for the whole food court to hear:

"Fucking wannabe loser!" OK, so it's not the best line, but we all laugh anyway, because that's how it's done. Mr. Security tries to shrug it off, striding in the other direction with a shake of his head and wry smile, but everyone can see how tight his fists are clenched and how red his little ears are getting. Our work here is done, so we head for the door.

"What now?" Sarah asks.

"You got somewhere to be?" They all shake their heads. "Let's have a drink then. I'll meet you at the car."

"Cool."

I head down the mall to the liquor store, stroll inside with my head up, and head for the back wall. The guy behind the counter gives me a wave and a nod as I go by, and I'm careful to smile big for him and meet his eyes. This is always easier when it's a guy. It's tequila that I really want, but it's more expensive, so I just grab some rum and make for the counter. You have to be decisive in a liquor store, or people think you don't know what you're doing there. I should know; I've been thrown out of quite a few.

We do the smalltalk thing while he rings up my 2-6 and a 2L of Coke. I've already entered my PIN and pressed OK when suddenly he squints closer at me, then pops the ID question, almost sheepishly. My heart starts beating double-time. The debit machine loudly proclaims a successful transaction.

"Aren't you supposed to check that *before* you sell it to me?" I ask with a coy smile. He only shrugs, so I lean a little further over the counter, flashing some more cleavage as I turn it on a little. "You don't *really* think I'm not 18, do you?"

His eyes make a quick trip down, then settle back on mine. "Just gotta be sure. Sorry, it's the rules." He looks apologetic, and he's still smiling, but I can tell he's not going to be talked out of it, so I reach into my purse and hand him my sister's driver's license. The photo sort of looks like me, but it's not

like we're twins or anything. Plus she's 23, and I don't really look 23. This only works about half the time, and usually only when it's a guy behind the counter.

This guy checks the date, but barely glances at the picture. He hands it back to me, and mumbles something about a good night as he turns to help the next customer.

Once outside, I realize that his "good night" remark was actually not that far off. It's starting to get dark, must be around suppertime. I probably should phone home, but my parents should know by now that I never come right home from school on a Friday. They'll be pissed off, probably, but it's not like I'm gonna tell them about my oh-so-exciting day at school and then do my homework and go to sleep. It's the weekend, for Christ's sake.

And so we sit, sipping rum from our fast food cups, chillin' in Sarah's car as we watch people go in and out of Safeway. The tunes are thumpin' – we've cranked the bass so it pushes out our open windows into the parking lot, battering the pedestrians as they pass. For most of them, it's probably been so long since they've heard new music that they can't even handle it, can't relate. That's why it's funny.

Some thirtysomething guy in a black convertible pulls up in the spot next to us, all rush-rush, time-is-money attitude with his flashy watch, shades from 5 years ago and lame businessman's haircut. He pauses for a second to flash us disdain as our beats swallow up his classic rock, before jumping out and making a beeline for the Safeway ATM. He totally thinks he's hot shit, this wanker. He's probably a fucking accountant. It makes me want to run him

over, and I enjoy the fantasy for a moment before shifting my loathing to the cloud of teenybopper Britney Spears wannabes passing by. Fourteen, lip gloss and tight tees that show off their stomachs, jabbering on and on about clothes and boys. Morons. One of them stops suddenly, cocks her ear toward the tune we're playing and starts boppin' her little head. I make Brett change the track.

It's hot, sweltering even as the sun slips away and shadows push greedily across the yellow lines of the parking lot towards the car. I'm melting into the back seat, sweaty and sweetly bombed, head pleasantly heavy, foot out the window swaying lazily in time with the bass. The bottle is empty, so eventually I decide I'll just run it over to the recycling bin around the side of the building. The air will feel good on my face, I'm pretty sure, and it'll be nice to get out for a minute – the music is becoming like thick insulation in my skull, so loud for so long it's starting to dull.

Just as I reach the big blue bin, spent bottle in hand, I hear a woman walking nearby call out to me:

"Shame on you, girl! Out an about like that in public! You can barely walk straight!" Talking down to me, of course. I gently place the bottle in the bin and slam the lid shut, spinning to face her with a sneer fixed in place. She's stopped to glare at me, a child's fist clutched in each hand, looking for all the world like she's about to lecture me, like being a mother somehow gives her the right.

Just as she's opening her mouth to yell, I notice the third kid, obviously one of hers, who has stopped a couple of steps behind to pick up some shiny shards of green glass off the pavement. Wordlessly, I point at him, and she's forced to swallow her rant to deal with the situation. Way to keep an eye on your kid, lady.

"Mind your own damn business!" I call out for good measure as I stroll back to Sarah's car, swinging back into my seat with a satisfied grin.

"So. What do you guys wanna do now?"

> *Most of us accept the stories our culture tells us – stories we've heard since childhood. It is daring to live lives that are too different from these stories. But in adolescence, one may dream the daring.*
>
> Nancy Cobb, 2004, p.1

> *Are adolescents themselves the true authors of their stories, or, by dint of the power of a distracting culture, are their stories little more than the internalization of others' stories?*
>
> Thomas Cottle, 2001, p.5

The stories of adolescence are both contrived and transgressive, at once enacting and resisting prescribed personal development. Adolescence itself, as we know, is an utterly artificial conceptual and chronological concept that emerged less than 200 years ago as the result of institutional shifts prolonging education and delaying employment (Tyyskä, 2001, 28-29). These profound cultural changes created a new category of human, an intermediate age group comprised neither of children nor adults, but something in-between, transforming from one to the other. The consequences of this

cultural formulation as a context for teenage alcohol use are deeply relevant to the present project, whatever the roots of adolescence as a concept. The social significance of adolescence as it pertains to drinking is largely governed by the tensions at the core of its in-between identity. This stage of life incarnates the movement or transition between child and adult, and as such is constituted by both; maturity and independence coexist with values and expectations of rebellion, irresponsibility, and dependence upon others. It is in this context that alcohol is introduced, itself an adult privilege that also carries expectations of irresponsible, disinhibited behaviour which seem contrary to mature adulthood. The congruence is clear. For teens, drinking visibly enacts the maturity they long to demonstrate (Shaw, 2002, 7), yet it is obviously also a youthful rebellion "that directly opposes that which is expected or demanded by authority figures," who may seek to protect them from this grown-up behaviour (Jaynes & Rugg, 1988, 25). Underage alcohol consumption can be understood as an element of the adolescent project of forging independent identities, and the process of social identification discussed above (Fisher & Bauman, 1988, 289; Jaynes & Rugg, 1988, 24). And yet, even though independence and self-sufficiency are positive values within adolescent culture, they are impossible, anathema at this stage of life (Bank et al., 1985, 55-66). Moreover, to the extent that underage drinking is a rebellious way for individuals to take charge of their person and identity, it is a predictable and even conformist path to do so. Adolescents, then, can no more escape the inconsistent, paradoxical nature of their cultural locus than can researchers intent upon discerning distinctive elements of teenage behaviour.

The tensions that are constitutive of this phase of life are not simply ascribed, static conflicts that apply broadly and evenly to all youth. It is extremely important to

acknowledge the role of time here; adolescence is very much figured in terms of *development*, of the transformation from childhood (past) to adulthood (future). In this light, underage drinking is not simply an issue of teens stuck halfway to adult status, but one in which youth in the process of becoming autonomous individuals co-opt alcohol into their lives prematurely. The difference is subtle, but significant: drinking becomes a reckless phase with the potential to damage the all-important *future* (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002), and is therefore swept up in "the linear, unidirectional, and cumulative conception of growth, development, and change of which adolescence is a part" (Lesko, 2001, 196). This perspective construes alcohol use as volatile and potentially dangerous, but educational as well, since "learning how to drink 'responsibly' is one of the many tasks adolescents are expected to accomplish in their efforts to achieve independent adulthood" (Bank et al., 1985, 167). Moreover, underage drinking is a distinct and limited stage, from which everyone – even teens themselves – expect they will emerge in the future as later age-appropriate values and responsibilities set in (Lightfoot, 1997, 108-109). The danger, of course, is that the perceived recklessness or excess characteristic of teenage alcohol use will persist and inhibit conformity to these future expectations. It seems, then, that the conceptualization of youth as always "becoming" engenders the notion that they must be guided and/or monitored so that they avoid threats to an appropriate, productive future (Lesko, 2001, 111). Nancy Lesko (2001) elegantly phrases it thus:

> Avoiding precocity through slow development means that the present is emptied of meaningful events; the past may have significance, but really *only the future matters*...the end of the adolescence story is primary...
>
> [S]ince the end of the story matters, and adults know what the correct and happy ending is (increasing maturity and responsibility, school achievement, full-time employment, marriage and children, property ownership, in that order), only deviations or pitfalls along the prescribed plot merit attention. (132, emphasis in original)

It is easy to see how drinking is established as one of these pitfalls. Drunkenness or recklessness in the present are not necessarily cause for concern, save for their potential to thwart the attainment of culturally prescribed future goals.

There appears to be a curious divide here, in terms of the developmental implications of teenage drinking. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that inconsistency and paradox are, as we have seen, deeply embedded in the social treatment of adolescence, alcohol, and underage drinking. On one hand, we have the view that, developmentally speaking, adolescents are "highly vulnerable to the development of problems and dependencies" as a result of drinking that will affect the course of their lives negatively (Jaynes & Rugg, 1988, 13). In this view, alcohol threatens or interferes with physiological and emotional maturation, and by extension the successful transition to adulthood (Roth & Friedman, 1990). The future is in peril. On the other hand, in spite of the risks involved, drinking seems to "serve important constructive functions for youth" as well, such as "exploring personal [and social] identity", furthering their "transition to mature status", "fostering ties with friends", etc. (Maggs et al., 1995, 345). The vast majority of healthy, competent youth engage in some level of "problem behaviour," yet most become healthy, competent adults (Maggs et al., 1995, 345). The future is assured. In fact, perhaps underage drinking can even be viewed as more constructive than detrimental, given that it seems to aid, facilitate, or at least play a role in the development of many more youth than it hinders. One cannot make this claim with any certainty, however, as statements about the quantity of benefit or detriment cannot be sustained by the data available at present. Nevertheless, one might reasonably wonder what developmental needs or tasks are most directly implicated in terms of personal and

social development wrought during the course of drinking underage. Again, however, the matter is not so simple, as we cannot presume that all youth are driven by the same developmental needs, nor should we imagine that alcohol affects personal growth in the same manner for all (Mace, 1992). In any case, cultural rhetoric appears to portray underage consumption as alternatively appropriate to healthy maturation, and a perilous threat to the same (Greene, Krcmar, Walters, Rubin & Hale, 2000). In essence, it seems to depend on one's reading of its effects on the future – and perhaps this perspective is itself limiting:

> The common characterizations of youth, I slowly realized, comprised a sealed system of reasoning...[involving] the inability to talk and think about youth outside the discourse of "adolescent development." (Lesko, 2001, 189)

Perhaps there is more insight to be gained by exploring that which is commonly ignored: the role of underage drinking within the context of the immediate, immanent world of the present with which adolescents themselves are concerned. Indeed, this notion has underpinned the bulk of my analysis thus far, and will continue to strongly inform subsequent sections.

Idle Hands and Empty Rooms

Adolescence and its expressions are frequently read in terms of development and the future, yet adolescents themselves are understandably less inclined to a preoccupation with the selves they might become. Teens are concerned with the here and now; the issues, events and minutia of their everyday lives dominate their attention:

> Although youth themselves are expected to take each moment seriously, we, the adult audience, know that these things are relatively trivial. (Lesko, 2001, 132)

Certainly we are all obsessed with the personal and the present to a greater or lesser extent, yet adolescent culture tends to be characterized by significantly less autonomy and responsibility than adults experience, and so the imperative to reflect upon consequences for the future tends to be less (Newberry & Duncan, 2001, 538). Moreover, the plethora of developmental changes endured by youth invokes intense self-scrutiny (Jaynes & Rugg, 1988), and a tendency towards egocentrism is to be expected as adolescent metamorphoses occur (Greene et al., 2000).

There are a number of implications of this teenage preoccupation with the present for the study of youth and alcohol. The most obvious is that infamous quality, the "invincibility" of youth. Teens may presume that negative consequences will not occur as a result of their drinking (Greene et al., 2000; Jaynes & Rugg, 1988), in spite of the fact that they are usually well aware of the risks involved, as noted above. This is a commonly held stereotype, that youth either cannot recognize or choose to ignore the potential negatives associated with risk-taking behaviours, both in terms of the adult self they are on their way to becoming and more immediate pitfalls such as alcohol poisoning. However, my analysis to this point suggests that perhaps the notion of teenage invulnerability is far too simplistic an explanation for underage drinking. While it may indeed be the case that adolescent egocentrism often entails a cognitive over-differentiation of self from others (Greene et al. 2000), it does not, as we have seen, so absorb the subject as to render impossible considerations of risk, reward, meaning, image, and others. It is not my intention, then, to contravene my previous arguments by suggesting that teens are myopically grounded in the moment and thus believe themselves invulnerable to future pitfalls. Instead, I aim only to illuminate the adolescent

tendency toward preoccupation with the present as yet another facet of our increasingly complex understanding of decisions regarding alcohol. Perhaps it is in fact the case that this temporal focus renders them more likely to value short-term, positive outcomes and minimize their emphasis upon risks and negatives of drinking. It seems, then, that the importance of identity issues and personal meaning among underage drinkers is further underscored by this temporally-oriented perspective on adolescence:

> the world of self-exploration, what many adults perceive as the selfishness or self-indulgence of adolescence, is precisely what is meant to characterize this stage of development. (Cottle, 2001, 4)

Adolescents mired in the immanence of the everyday must struggle with the tedium that often arises as a product of their in-between status. Though well on their way to adulthood, teens have few direct avenues (outside of school achievement) through which they may make meaningful contributions to their future lives as productive adults. A consequent emphasis upon entertainment and diversion in the present is not only understandable, but predictable in light of the inability of youth to join the independent adult world. Boredom, thus inflated in significance, has been identified by some as a contributing factor to underage drinking (e.g. Kafka & London, 1991). In fact, boredom has been linked to deviant behaviour in general among adolescents, and it has been implicated as a contributing factor to the sensation-seeking activities of young people (Greene et al. 2000; Newberry & Duncan, 2001). Tedium, then, which for teens may be rooted in "socially structured limitations on resources, especially opportunities for self-control," seems a normal, expected element of adolescent life that may make alcohol attractive as a diversion (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 12 and 43). The use of alcohol, then, would seem to take on the role of something to do to pass the time, in addition to its significance as a socially and personally meaningful activity. Glassner and Loughlin

(1987) argue that school and informal sociation, as the two major activities available to adolescents, are considerable contributors to this situation, given that both are characterized by boredom for many (45). Education, in particular, has been indicted as a fount of tedium, not only because youth are forced to attend structured, dull classes, but also due to the fact that schools do not effectively teach leisure skills, which are seen as secondary (Scitovsky, 1999). Whether one is willing to point the finger at the education system, a rising cultural emphasis upon "pleasure-seeking behaviour" or "hedonism" (MacDonald, 1989, 79-80), or the structural realities of adolescence (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987), there seems to be some agreement among scholars that the idleness and boredom inflicted upon youth can only heighten the attractiveness of drinking underage.

The structure of adolescence shapes not only the motivations for drinking, but the settings in which it can occur as well. Location is important for underage consumers, given that drinking is nominally delinquent and illegal, and moreover is often interpreted as rebellious or immoral, as illustrated above. Youth bent on transgressing boundaries in this manner must usually protect their activities from detection and disruption, which often entails secrecy and seclusion (Lightfoot, 1997, 112). Opportunity and surveillance thus become key concerns (Alexander & Campbell, 1968, 369). A recent study by Andrea Hussong (2000) pinpointed friends' homes, parties, and one's own home as the most common settings for underage drinking, in that order. Gender differences seem to exist, however: "female alcohol users were more likely to report using at family parties and to some extent in their own homes than were male alcohol users," and "boys report alcohol (though not illicit drug) use in a greater number of settings than do girls" overall, meaning that "girls and boys choose to use substances in somewhat different settings"

(Hussong, 2000, 116). Nevertheless, these common locales certainly satisfy the requirement of secluding the participants from public space and authorities, and yet they seem to entail a greater risk of family surveillance, which raises the question of why teens might prefer to drink there than, for instance, an empty field. Interestingly, Hussong's study also suggests that abstainers, who are apparently "not as aware of the many settings in which substance use occurs," are also less likely to indicate their own or friends' homes as a potential drinking locale, were they to drink (117). These abstainers, then, as well as those who are surprised by the preference of youth to drink in houses, may simply have yet to consider some points in favour of these locales which are obvious to teens faced with the choice:

1. Drinking outdoors or in public may remove the participants from direct parental/family surveillance, yet any discovery of their activity by an outside authority figure risks informing the family in any case.

2. Youth may be easily recognizable to authority figures as underage when drinking in a public place, or at a public or community event (Jones-Webb, Toomey, Short, Murray, Wagenaar & Wolfson, 1997, 1278).

3. The stakes may be higher when drinking outside the home, as intervention by an outside authority figure (such as a police officer, teacher, or business proprietor) may carry additional repercussions aside from the disapproval and discipline of family members.

4. Surveillance and consequences within the home may be more predictable or easily avoidable. A parent or family authority figure may be absent, ignorant of the underage consumption, or accepting of this behaviour.

In contrast to the home, school provides little in the way of opportunity, and threatens much in terms of surveillance and consequence. It is somewhat ironic that school, as the root of much of the adolescent tedium propelling youth to seek diversion, is actually quite an uncommon locale for drinking. According to Hussong's study, a very small percentage of teens reported drinking at school, school-sponsored events, or school-related events (1.3%, 2.7% and 3.5%, respectively). Though this pioneering study was conducted at public schools, it has elsewhere been suggested that private and public schools differ little in terms of the drinking habits of their members (Arata, Stafford & Tims, 2003, 578). There may, however, be significant developmental variations in the contexts of underage consumption. Twelfth graders, for example, were found by one study to be more likely to report drinking at someone else's home or in an open field, as compared to ninth graders (Mayer, Forster, Murray & Wagenaar, 1998) . The contexts of drinking, then, may shift with age, as youth are accorded more freedoms (McCarthy & Brown, 2004, 289). For instance, the attainment of a driver's license may increase opportunities to drink in unsupervised settings (McCarthy & Brown, 2004, 290). Although their relevance may shift according to a variety of factors, key concerns such as surveillance, secrecy and opportunity likely persist throughout adolescence, as underage drinkers are rarely afforded the luxury of drinking openly without concern for who may discover them. Their very adolescence makes this so. It is time, however, to shift our focus to the relationships that populate these settings of underage consumption. Adolescence and its constructions are certainly important considerations for the study of drinking among youth, and this contextual understanding will prove useful in examining

the social and interpersonal dynamics that are enacted and affected as alcohol is incorporated into the lives of adolescents.

The car passes by several empty spots right in front of the store and swings into a parking space around the side of the building where there are no windows. This is standard practice for them by now, ever since that one liquor store clerk refused to sell them anything because the kids waiting in the car didn't have ID. The vehicle shudders to a halt, but the doors don't open right away, as Ravinder is still taking orders and collecting money. Kiera and Allison are bickering over what to get, and Suki is frowning next to them in the back, wondering if he can afford to get anything. Marc is the only one who has decided, but, to be fair, it isn't much of a decision. He always has beer.

"C'mon guys! Make up your minds!" Ravinder is getting impatient, and also a little nervous that they'll draw attention, just sitting here outside the store. A brief period of heated argument ensues:

"Suki – do you want me to get you somethin', or not?"

"Kiera I said no gin, dammit!"

"Uh...yeah...some beer I guess. Thanks Rav."

"But I like gin! And I hate rum!"

"That's stupid. You can't have beer."

"Gin gives me a fucking headache. You *know* this!"

"What the fuck! Marc's getting beer!"

"No I don't *know* that! We're still not getting rum!"

"Marc's got gym clothes in his bag to pack around the bottles."

"Why not? There's always Coke at my house to mix."

"Pack around the bottles? What, for noise?"

"Yeah, only *rum tastes like shit*! You're not listening!"

"Yeah, Allison's parents will still be up when we get there."

"Wuss. Well, what do we get then?"

"So get cans, for fuck's sake."

"Vodka?"

"Oh. Right, sorry. Cans."

"Whiskey."

"Here's a ten. I'm officially broke."

"Whiskey?! Are you on crack?"

"Man, you need a job. You're always broke."

"Fine. Vodka. The vanilla kind though."

Decisions made, they fall into idle chatter until Ravinder returns with the merchandise, which is carefully stowed in bags and backpacks with care to obscure shape and sound. They cruise over to Allison's house, where they're greeted by her mother before they've even removed their shoes. She's cheerful, but slightly tense in the manner of all parents confronted by groups of teenagers.

"Hi guys! What are you all up to so late?"

"Oh, hi Mrs. McNeil. Nothing much really."

"Don't you all have school tomorrow?"

"Mom I told you it's a PD day."

"Oh that's right. Well, is anybody hungry? Allison, we've got lots of pop and juice in the basement you can offer your friends."

"I know, mom. We're fine."

"Oh, I didn't see you back there, Kiera – how's your dad doing?"

"He's feeling much better this week, Mrs. McNeil. Thanks so much for the flowers you sent, by the way. They were lovely."

"Oh, don't mention it. I – "

"*Mom*."

"Oh, alright, I'm off to bed. You kids have fun."

Dismissed, they file past her on eggshells and make it to the basement without a suspicious clink of glass or aluminum to give them away. The TV is enlisted for twenty minutes or so, to ensure that the McNeils are actually in bed, and there to stay, before the bags are opened and beverages passed around. Eventually, they achieve the usual configuration: Suki and Kiera face off at foosball, with Allison and Ravinder lounging nearby on the couch and carrying the conversation. Marc sits at the end of the couch playing Playstation games, occasionally pausing to shotgun a beer, to the delight of all. The usual banter ensues:

"Suki, are you still on your *first* beer?"

"So Helen totally faked that coughing fit yesterday."

"It's my second, Rav."

"Are you sure, Kiera? It looked real to me."

"What's up with that? Catch up!"

"No, she just wanted out of Ms. Olinov's class!"

"I'm pacing myself. Plus I'm playin' foosball."

"Wow, she's good! That was totally convincing!"

"Pacing? You wuss – Kiera's playing and she's drinking."

"Hey yeah – maybe that's why you're winning, Suki!"

"I'm winning 'cause you suck. And I *am* drinking. Chill out."

"Pfft. Barely. You should quit playing anyway. It's probably keeping her parents up."

"Rav's right – my mom will probably come yell at us soon for making so much noise. You guys should cut it out or she might come down here."

"Fine, I win. Would your mom even care about us drinking down here? She's so nice..."

"Well, probably it'd be OK. She's loosened up lately – last week my brother came home completely hammered and he didn't get grounded or anything!"

"No shit?"

"Yeah, I think they're just used to the idea now or something. My brother and his friends drink *all the time*."

"Allison, *we* drink all the time. It's all we do anymore."

"Is not! We went to a movie yesterday!"

"You were drunk!"

"Was not! I had two drinks! Anyway, we don't drink nearly as much as those guys. We don't even drink half as much as the preps, even."

"You mean Julie, Leroy and all those assholes with lockers by the gym?"

"Yeah. With them it's like every single Friday and Saturday. Somebody's always having a party. Plus there's during the week."

"They're such assholes."

"We heard you the first time, Suki. Cheers."

"Cheers."

"Shotgun time!"

And that, more or less, is how they pass the evening.

All theories of adolescence identify it as a period of development in which youth strive to develop identities independent of their parents, and as such their peers become much more significant (Fisher & Bauman, 1988, 289). Adolescents experience a growth in stable, affectively-oriented friendships, as well as the proliferation of peer groups or "crowds," which appear to espouse prototypic lifestyles and value systems (Brown et al., 1997, 161). Friendships and peer groupings "provide freedom from parents and other authority figures, alternative norms and information about expected behaviour, and a setting for conforming to these expectations" (Tyyskä, 2001, 161). Indeed, it is largely taken for granted that affective integration among youth of similar ages is required for healthy development (Miller et al., 2002, 30-31). Peer interactions not only permit teens to develop important social and relationship skills, but also play a crucial role in shaping an adolescent's reading of themselves and their behaviour (Cottle, 2001, 4). Thus, the issues of meaning and identity discussed earlier are directly linked to the peer network, as social concerns overlap and intertwine with personal ones. In fact, it has been suggested

that adolescents are most inclined to gauge their actions in terms of their appeal to peers (Rawlins, 1992, cited in Miller et al., 2000, 34), rather than any other group or figure. This augmented status of peers is a prominent concern for the study of underage drinking, as the peer network plays a central role in structuring this behaviour (Donohew, Hoyle, Clayton, Skinner, Colon & Rice, 1999). Moreover, the influence of other adolescents is relevant because, "as is true among adults, drinking and getting drunk among adolescents are primarily social activities" (Schulenberg et al., 1999, 108). Research indicates that membership in a peer group that itself is conducive to drinking predicts subsequent consumption for youth (Blanton et al., 1997). Modelling of behaviours and attitudes among teens seems to be associated with levels of alcohol use (Ary et al., 1993; Blanton et al., 1997), and perceived use by friends and peers is strongly related to self-reported use (Bray, Getz & Baer, 2000). In short, it is obvious that the relationships and social networks among adolescents comprise a fruitful site of inquiry for the study of underage alcohol consumption. It is imperative, then, that the nature of these peer interactions and their effects upon teenage drinking should be subject to closer analysis.

All the Cool Kids are Doin' It

> When middle-class adults in the U.S. talk about teenagers these days, "peer pressure" is the buzzword of choice. It is blamed for most behaviours to which these adults object...Substance use in particular has been singled out in the popular media as having its roots in peer pressure. The entire "Just Say No" campaign seems to be based on the implicit assumption that the evil force bearing down on young people is their own friends and acquaintances.
>
> *Kafka & London, 1991*

For many adults in Canada and the United States, the adolescent peer group is an ominous entity: fraught with danger, beyond parental control, a breeding ground for the immoral, the reckless, and, of course, for peer pressure. The most common, obvious "cause" of teenage substance use in general, and thus of underage drinking in particular seems to be peer pressure (Jaynes & Rugg, 1988, 57), which "in social science and in popular culture...has come to stand for social influence theories of delinquency" (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 146). Indeed, it has been suggested that susceptibility to peer influence is a significant variable in terms of adolescent alcohol consumption (Schulenberg et al., 1999), though there may be gender and developmental differences in the applicability of this concept (Tyyskä, 2001, 163). Interestingly, it also appears that teens themselves tend to accept this common, readily available explanation that has been provided to them for the conduct of their peers (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987; Kafka & London, 1991). However, among youth, peer pressure is bound to notions of strength of character, and it is seen as thoroughly undesirable to do something just because someone else does (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 147). Independence and autonomy, after all, can be virtuous qualities among teens, as noted in the preceding chapter. It seems, then, that although adolescents may recognize that group context may create situations where illegal consumption is likely for themselves or others, they are unlikely to interpret their own behaviour this way, as peer pressure is primarily "something that happens to unfortunate or weak others" (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 147-148). How is it, then, that everyone seems to think teens are forcing other teens to misbehave, yet youth themselves rarely seem to believe they are being pressured?

Isn't this whole "peer pressure" idea a little bit suspicious anyway? Whenever I hear the words, I find that I have no memory or anecdote to apply; instead my mind travels back to elementary and junior high school, to educational speeches or videos that set the scene: someone is offering you something *bad*, a drug or a drink, insisting that you partake in spite of your reservations – this is peer pressure. We were supposed to Just Say No. But we didn't, and most people don't, at least not to alcohol. Does this mean we've succumbed to the pressure, been forced to partake, or even forced others to do so? How often do you recall doing something, and then thinking "Jeez, I sure got peer-pressured into that. Why oh why did my friends make me do that?" I digress, but the point, I think, is significant: though peer pressure seems like the easy, obvious answer to a whole range of adolescent "problem" behaviours, it does not seem to accurately represent the interactions that occur among teens. In fact, this does not seem at all like a sufficiently comprehensive or sophisticated notion to address the plethora of personal and social variables at play:

> In those cases where the peer group *has been or could be* influential in a subject's drug use, the matter is more psychologically and sociologically complex than is captured by 'peer pressure'. (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 158, emphasis in original)

Firstly, this concept robs adolescent subjects of much of their agency; sure, they can say "no" or "yes," but only when faced with a situation of oppression or negative influence. Most adults *want* to drink at some time or other, so why shouldn't youth? Moreover, the type of explicit influence suggested by peer pressure is only one possible (and perhaps less likely) scenario: "[o]ur data suggest that overt persuasion happens much less frequently than the media would have us believe" (Kafka & London, 1991, 595). In fact, it seems fruitful to enact a conceptual division between "overt attempts by one individual

to persuade another to engage in an activity" and the more subtle, "implicit pressure" to conform to the norms or behaviours of one's peers (Miller et al., 2000, 34). This latter sense, divorced from the notion of the overt exercise of power between youth, is perhaps a much more salient site of inquiry.

The will to conform is strong during adolescence, as we have seen, even though teens themselves simultaneously value autonomy: "much as adolescents are called upon to be both dependent and independent, they are castigated for behaving like other adolescents *and* criticized if they do *not* behave that way" (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 178, emphasis in original). Previously, the manner in which choice, agency and personal meaning impact underage drinking was examined, however care must be taken not to elide this other side of the issue: the imperative to be like everyone else. The examples of other adolescents or groups of adolescents can exert pressure on individuals to conduct themselves in the same manner (Brown et al., 1997, 179). In fact, it has been argued that peer norms are actually more important than peer (dis)approval when it comes to drinking behaviour (Arata et al., 2003; Beck & Trieman, 1996). This suggests that decisions about alcohol commonly entail some degree of reflection regarding one's own drinking practice vis-à-vis that of their peers, and also the desire for the security of homogeneity. Concerns about the norms and character of peer groups, of course, are tied to questions about one's own identity (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 156). It is important to note, however, that it is the *perceived* norms, habits and benchmarks for drinking among other teens that comprise the standard for conformity (Fisher & Bauman, 1988, 311). Strong correlations have been observed between beliefs about friends' alcohol use and actual use by adolescents (Fisher & Bauman, 1988; Kafka & London, 1991). Indeed,

perceived friends' use has been found to be a much stronger correlate of drinking than actual friends' use, a relationship which has been observed both in cross-sectional and longitudinal data, and which may even increase in strength with age (Ianotti et al., 1996). It is somewhat ironic, then, that most of these perceptions tend to be inaccurate. Adolescents aren't necessarily good judges of how much other adolescents around them actually drink, or how often (Donohew et al., 1999; Hussong, 2002). And, as illustrated above, they tend to overestimate, rather than underestimate, the consumption of others. Why might this be? We might speculate that exaggeration, coupled with a lack of access to factual information, contributes to overestimation, or that teens often assume a given drinking occasion that they hear about or partake in to be habitual among the others present. Makela (1997), however, offers the intriguing explanation that youth may overestimate others' consumption so as to better situate themselves morally. From this perspective, inaccurate beliefs about others' use permit some teens to situate their current or prospective habits of consumption either as normal, or as less serious/transgressive/immoral than someone else's, depending on their needs in terms of self-identification. In any case, adolescents' perceptions of their peers' drinking, inaccurate though they may be, are certainly a relevant factor in their own patterns of consumption.

I, Them, We

Any analysis of the role of peer interaction in underage drinking must sooner or later confront the difficulty inherent in trying to address the overwhelming complexity and fluidity of adolescent social networks. The categories "peer" and "friend" seem too

vague, and tell us very little about the nature or quality of the relationships they describe, though surely these are important considerations. Are youth of the same age who despise one another likely to exert the same mutual influence to conform as friends? One would think not. There are, of course, different levels of peer groupings, such as the age cohort, friendship groups, crowds, peer clusters, dyads, cliques, best friendships, etc. (Miller et al., 2000, 31), each of which, one would imagine, exert different contextual pressures and imperatives. Empirical data to date, however, does not permit the scrutiny and comparison of these different levels in terms of their impact on underage consumption. It seems that, in general, closer friendships play a more powerful role in shaping drinking decisions (Hussong, 2002; Kafka & London, 1991), though there could be a variety of reasons why this might be so. At this point, research has not been able to disentangle the intricacies of peer networks sufficiently to illuminate with any precision the interpersonal mechanisms through which influence operates. This is not to say, however, that there is nothing to be gained from a closer examination of peer groupings at a broader level. For instance, it seems clear that divisions among teens rely heavily upon labels, stereotypes and reputations with respect to the personality types, interests, and behaviours of members thus demarcated (Hussong, 2002; Brown et al., 1997). Thus, the inaccurate perceptions that tend to develop about the drinking patterns of other youth may operate in part on this stereotypical level; a teen may assume that all the jocks at school drink much more than they do based on gossip, stereotypes, or even other delinquent behaviour that they're "known" to have perpetrated. Indeed, health-related and deviant behaviours are among the central characteristics that serve to differentiate between crowds (Brown, Lohr and Trujillo, 1990; Hussong, 2002). These images and conceptions of peer groups must

then contribute to an adolescent's understanding of the norms and standards of drinking within the social network of their peers.

I've argued that adolescents feel pressure to conform to the norms around them with respect to alcohol, yet it is important not to lose sight of the fact that this is not simply an issue of consumption habits, but one of identity as well. Individuals adopt or adapt health-risk activities in part to acquire some of the characteristics they associate with people who do these things, a process that involves comparing their own image to that of persons deemed typical or prototypical of a given behaviour (Blanton et al., 1997). Drinking is thus tied to self-concept, as well as to the images and labels associated with others and their social groups. General, stereotypical characteristics of individuals and groups must therefore interact in adolescent consciousness with the examples provided by close friends and acquaintances in defining the norms for drinking. Of course, this process operates on a number of levels, and the images at stake are not stable; "the peer context is often poorly defined" and nebulous, in life as well as in research (Hussong, 2002, 207). Social groupings may be comprised of "multiple dimensions" and variable relationships (Hussong, 2002, 207), there can be overlap in membership and influence between disparate social crowds (Alexander & Campbell, 1968), and teens themselves need not exist as part of a crowd, nor as participants in only one such temporary aggregate (Brown et al. 1997, 178). Moreover, there are a plethora of social variables that may exacerbate, offset, or merely interact with the influence of a given peer structure even as it provides opportunities to model and mirror drinking behaviour (Hussong, 2002, 207-216). So, the precise impact of peer networks with respect to alcohol remains elusive, owing to the variability of social relationships among youth. And yet, the peer

group is clearly an important context for the negotiation of personal and collective identity issues as they relate to deviant behaviour such as drinking. Peer groups do exert pressure to conform, yet none are isolated as sole contributor to an adolescent's conceptualization of alcohol and its consumption.

It seems likely, when studying youth and their social networks, that similarity should play an important role. Adolescent groups and friendships tend to be characterized by homogeneity, and thus the substance use habits among friends are usually similar (Fisher & Bauman, 1988; Kafka & London, 1991). This homogeneity is often positive in terms of group dynamics: it can increase approval of one another among members, minimize hostility and cognitive inconsistency, and provide mutual validation for identities (Fisher & Bauman, 1988, 291). These benefits no doubt contribute powerfully to the imperative to conform as similarity, in addition to providing security for a given individual, strengthens the group and can produce more positive interactions. Illustrated above are arguments that peers exert pressure upon individuals, yet who can believe that this is a neat, one-way relationship that is so easily summed up? One study (Dishion & Skaggs, 2000), upon finding the usual significant association between time spent with "deviant" peers and adolescents' substance use levels, notes that the direction of this relationship could not be determined. The suggestion here, then, is that there is in fact another element of this relationship, in which agency and the impetus to drink can be ascribed to the individual, as well as the peer group. Selection, which refers to the choice to spend time among peer groups with particular characteristics and substance use habits, has been employed as a means to conceptualize this personal agency among youth. Indeed, cross-sectional correlations that demonstrate a relationship between peer

associations and drinking may elide the role of selection, which operates in the opposite direction of influence (Fisher & Bauman, 1988, 290-311). Teens tend to select friends of similar sensation-seeking levels to their own – or, one would think, those of a *desired* level of deviance from a particular rule, ideal, imperative, or expectation – and then these peer characteristics (which are not necessarily static) may exert greater influence in closer proximity as friendships strengthen (Donohew et al., 1999). Indeed, it has been suggested that peer crowds in general are less likely to fundamentally redirect adolescent behaviour than to sustain a pre-existing trajectory (Brown et al., 1997, 178). Homogeneity among youth therefore seems to be a product of the complex interplay between selection and influence, though these elements locate the impetus for underage drinking in different places (Fisher & Bauman, 1988). This seems oddly appropriate, as yet another incarnation of the tension at the core of adolescent existence between conformity and autonomy.

The Elephant in the Room

I'm late when I arrive, so I just walk in the front door by myself, scanning the place for my friends as I take off my shoes. I'm hoping to spot someone I know ASAP, because I've never been here before, and don't even know whose house this is. No luck though – the living room is packed with unfriendly faces, some of whom turn to look with suspicion or curiosity at me, my six-pack, and my obvious lack of friends. A few of them are dancing badly to the deafening beat, but most are just hanging out, drinking and showing off their expensive clothes. Can't go that way. The staircase in front of me has

been cordoned off with something that looks like police tape, but reads *Save Our Elms!* in bold, panicky letters. There's a sign, too – *Off Limits* – but it's been knocked askew, possibly as someone picked their way through the web of tape on their way up. Can't go that way. Looks like the hall to my right is the best option, so I head that way.

The bathroom is spewing light and laughter into the hall as I pass, so I can't help glancing in. Two girls are giggling like crazy and a third snaps her head up from the counter, sniffing as hard as she can. I've never understood why it's called blow – shouldn't the nickname be *sniff* or *snort* or something? Not as cool, I guess.

A glance into the kitchen and I'm starting to get worried. There's a couple people that I recognize in here, playing some drinking game with cards. But none of my friends. From here I can see out onto the patio as well, and it looks like it's just couples, making out and occasionally glancing in through the windows to check on their audience. I scan the punked-out cardplayers at the table one more time, just to make sure, because one of them looked like James from the corner of my eye. It's just some guy though, who happens to be wearing the same Blink 182 shirt that James has. He's also cheating, hiding cards under his leg – why bother, I wonder.

I walk into the TV room and know I'm fucked – I don't see my friends anywhere. There's seven or eight people in here, lounging on couches and watching some kung fu movie turned way up so that the cheezy sound effects and dubbed dialogue can be heard over the noise from the rest of the house.

A couple of them seem to be holding bottles, but most seem to be drinking cans from the case of Pepsi on the table. They look bored, and squeaky clean. One or two look me up and down as I enter, making me even more uncomfortable. Trying to act casual, I crack a beer and lean up against the wall, digging in my pocket for my cellphone to check the time. 11:00. They should've been here hours ago. I check my messages. Nothing. One of the guys on the couch is watching me. I dial James' number. Nothing. Fuck! The little shit who's staring at me leans over and says something to the girl next to him, who glances my way and laughs. I dial Sean's phone. I swear, If they ditched without telling me, I'm gonna –

"Yeah?" Sean picks up and I feel my whole body relax.

"Sean, where the fuck *are* you guys?" I'm nearly yelling to be heard, earning me several irritated looks from the losers on the couch.

"Hey man – you here now?"

"Yeah. Where are you?"

"Basement. Get down here!"

Basement. Thank god. My six-pack and I bolt without a backward glance for the sober bunch, making a beeline for the far side of the kitchen where there are two doors. The first is a pantry cupboard – a little embarrassing – but the second hides stairs and I cruise on down and into a room full of my people. Most of them seem to be sitting around, sipping drinks and taking part in several extremely loud conversations occurring at

the same time. James and Sean, who are playing pool at a table that seems too big for the room, turn to greet me.

"Hey man – why so late?"

"I had practice. Can I play winner?"

"Nah, man. We're playin' for shots."

"Yeah, so?"

James points at my six-pack. "You've got some catchin' up to do first, or it wouldn't be fair otherwise." As if to emphasize James' point, Sean takes unsteady aim at the six ball and misses, sending the cueball off two rails and into the side pocket.

"Okay." I head over to the other side of the room, trying to sift through the yelling and laughter to determine which conversation will be the most interesting.

Dale is fielding requests and complaints about the music, standing over by the stereo.

Jonas is telling the story about how he and Vikram were almost arrested for doing drunken somersaults on the sidewalk – for the fiftieth time, at least.

Phuong is complaining about her mom, as usual. No one is listening, as usual, but the fact that she's swaying and bleary-eyed means that she's at the point where she doesn't need an audience anymore.

Craig and Kelly are having a serious talk about their relationship at the top of their lungs.

I take a swig of my beer and smile. Maybe I'll try to take over the stereo. Then everything will be as it should be.

Drinking, by virtue of the fact that it entails a conscious departure from the everyday and the mundane, is a special event among youth, and as such bears a number of implications for the cohesion and dynamics of a given group. Alcohol inevitably impacts the peer group setting, and the interactions therein. For instance, the cohesiveness of a given gathering is affected by the willingness of members to partake, particularly in cases where drinking has become the preferred social activity among friends (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002). Whether individuals are drinking and how much become important factors that shape the occasion. Given the deviant nature of underage consumption, as well as the significance of personal and moral interpretation in this context, a heightened sensitivity to the drinking habits of friends/peers is understandable (Fisher & Bauman, 1988). Without a peer context that is supportive of an individual's consumption, they may be left without a social "place" to drink, reducing their options to drinking alone or abstaining entirely (Schulenberg et al., 1999). The opinions, beliefs, and habits of peers therefore tend to be imbued with increased significance when alcohol is introduced into a given setting. After all, it is not only approval or disapproval of drinking that is at stake, but image, status, and possible tensions within the group. Drinking and other such "risk-taking" behaviours generally have positive implications for social standing (Lightfoot, 1997; Maggs et al., 1995; Shaw, 2002), yet where they are deemed unacceptable it is not only status but interpersonal relationships that are at risk. On the other hand, the drinking occasion carries the potential for a novel or special kind

of shared experience, owing to the inevitable changes in behaviour and perspective (Lightfoot, 1997, 99-100). The common tendency toward emotional nakedness or transparency, coupled with a greater degree of social leeway for unexpected behaviour, may result in more intense social events. These occasions are often "a fount of memories and secrets, or shared knowledge and experience, and invested with the meanings of group identity" (Lightfoot, 1997, 129). Clearly, then, the inclusion of alcohol in a group setting often has powerful implications for the subsequent interactions of those present. The social dynamics among the youth involved are inevitably altered, and often significantly so, a fact which suggests that the changes wrought by alcohol are key social considerations within peer groups which have incorporated its use into their leisure.

The Nuclear Family

Peers have been established as a significant consideration with respect to underage drinking behaviour, but what of the family? What of parents? On the one hand, research has noted that perceived parental attitudes significantly impact alcohol use among underage drinkers (Yu, 1998, 2698). Moreover, parental consumption has been substantially correlated with that of their adolescent children (McLaughlin, Baer, Burnside & Pokorny, 1985, 215). Some researchers have even suggested that family variables and parent-child relationships play the most crucial role in initiation and experimentation with alcohol, though not necessarily in continuing patterns of use (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1995; Miller et al., 2000). However, not all scholars are in agreement. In fact, it has been remarked that "the relative importance of parents and peers in adolescent drinking and drug use is an issue extensively debated in the literature" (Wilks, Callan & Austin, 1989, 619). Some have found that perceived parental attitudes and behaviours played only a weak role in discriminating among teens with different drinking habits (Beck & Treiman, 1996, 642). Similarly, Blanton and colleagues (1997) report little evidence that parental variables directly affect alcohol use or drinking prototypes among youth. Yet what constitutes a comprehensive study of parental variables and their measurable effects on adolescents? Consider, for instance, this statement that appears near the beginning of a (1996) study by Stephenson and Henry:

> Although there is greater empirical support for positive relationship between parental substance use and adolescent substance use, the contradictory nature of previous findings supports further exploration of this variable. (61)

Stephenson and Henry go on to examine a number of family variables and their impact on adolescent substance use, such as family hardiness, family coherence, observance of

celebrations and routines, parents' substance use, etc., – yet there are facets that are missing as well, including parenting style, strictness of rule enforcement, degree of supervision, and socio-economic status. Parental variables, then, are likely no less complex than peer influences in their impact on underage drinking. In terms of relative influence, my own reading of this debate is that there seems to be greater empirical support (e.g., Haans & Hotton, 2004; Needle, McCubbin, Wilson, Reinek, Lazar & Mederer, 1986; Windle, 2000) for the position that parental alcohol use has a weaker impact on underage consumption when compared with peer use, but this is only one dimension of the relationship between parental and peer influence. What, then, is one to make of these dissonant and idiosyncratic empirical claims?

First, it appears that "there may be an interaction between the type of influence studied by an investigator and the conclusions reached about the relative impact of parents and peers" (Bank et al., 1985, 165). In short, methodological differences may be to blame, such as the array of parental variables included in a study, the source for data on parents (i.e., the parents themselves or their adolescent children), and the other variables tested for interaction. It is my opinion, therefore, that the debate about relative influence frequently has the unintended effect of eliding the variety of means in which *both* parents and peers are entangled in the issue of underage consumption. Indeed, relative strength need not be a particular focus in any case; parents do seem to offer yet another piece of the puzzle of underage drinking, and their impact seems to intermingle with that of peers in the choices of adolescents to use substances of intoxication (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 49). For instance, parental variables can underpin the choice of friends or peer groups for teens, as well as the degree of peer involvement, which in turn

can influence their alcohol use (Alexander & Campbell, 1968; Blanton et al., 1997). Parents and peers exert different influences upon underage drinking, which have the potential to interact, and may do so differently according to gender (Wilks et al., 1989). One study, for example, determined that mothers' and fathers' social support and consistency of discipline buffered the effects of peer group affiliation on girls' alcohol use, but exacerbated peer effects on boys' use (Marshall & Chassin, 2000). Perhaps it is useful to conceive of different *valences* of parental and friends' influences, as suggested by Kafka and London (1991). This deft metaphor suggests the potential for separate or joint interactions between family members, peers, and adolescent subjects, depending on the nature of the relationships between the three in a given situation at a given time. In any case, it seems that a deeper scrutiny into the mechanisms of family influence upon adolescent alcohol use would be a fruitful addition to the previous chapter's analysis of issues related to peer groupings, though it would be difficult to sustain emphatic claims about the relevant importance of one or the other.

Passing the Torch

Christmas. The Calloways are hosting, as usual, and for the usual reason: they have the biggest house, and the only one large enough to accommodate the flock of aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents who congregate to eat and drink and sing together every holiday season. It's tradition by now, a day of warm routine, shiny parcels and the mouth-watering smell of Christmas turkey. Years past, it had been a day of good-natured chaos, with children darting to and fro clutching shiny new toys, chasing and

squealing and demanding a good chunk of everyone's attention. Lately though, everyone has been able to relax and enjoy family holidays more, now that the kids are mostly past the age where they might squeal. The grown-up table is getting crowded at dinner, and hearty conversation proceeds without its traditional pauses in which someone's child would have to be disciplined, cajoled, or ordered to eat potatoes instead of chocolates. Emboldened by several years of this benign tranquillity, Uncle Rob has brought several jugs of home-made eggnog with him this year – and one non-alcoholic jug just for the kids – which are proving a welcome addition to the usual meagre arsenal of beer and cheap Chardonnay. The eggnog is the hit of the party, in fact, hailed by all as the beginning of a new Christmas tradition. Little Jenny, the youngest member of the family at 11, is doing her best to partake in the new tradition:

"Uncle Rob, can I have a sip of your eggnog?"

"This is just for grown-ups, sweetie. It has alcohol in it."

"Oh I know. I just wanted to see what it tasted like. Please can I?"

"You wouldn't like this, honey."

"I guess not."

"Alright, just one taste then."

Over in the kitchen, cousins Eric and Luke are surreptitiously filling glasses from the wrong jug of eggnog. Born less than a month apart, these two have been partners-in-crime at family gatherings for most of their fourteen years, ever since they learned to walk and talk. For this reason, they

fall easily into their usual habit: Eric does the deed and Luke watches for parents. Luke couldn't believe that at dinner his sister Sheila was allowed a glass of real eggnog and he was stuck with the kiddie stuff. Eric, as always, hadn't needed much convincing.

"Grandma?"

"Yes Jenny dear?"

"Could I have a taste of your eggnog?"

"Oh, this has some rum in it, dear. You wouldn't like it anyway."

"I know. I just wanted to taste it, that's all."

"Oh well, just a taste then...that's enough now darling, give it back to Grandma. There's a good girl."

Upstairs, Sheila has cornered her dad, hoping that the holiday mood and a few drinks will make this the perfect time for her risky request:

"So Dad, my friend Adele is having a party for New Years, and I was wondering if I could go."

"Are Adele's parents going to be there?"

"Yeah, of course, but...Dad they wanted us to let you know...there will be alcohol there."

"You mean for the kids? Or just the adults?"

"Uh, I'm not sure...they didn't really say. They just wanted to make sure you were OK with it...probably we'll all have a glass of wine at midnight or something." Cringing inside – an obvious lie, surely he'll say no – but somehow it squeaks through.

"Well, I guess it's alright."

Meanwhile, Jenny is still carefully working the room:

"Aunt Barbara, can I taste your drink?"

"No dear, it has alcohol in it. You're not old enough."

"Just one sip is all. I just want to see what it tastes like."

"Honey, I said no – shame on you! You wouldn't like this anyway Jenny – hey Shelley, do you know what your daughter just asked me?"

Later, Eric is nabbed and scolded by Uncle Rob, who is not at all pleased to see his son sneaking drinks. Eric runs through his prepared excuses quickly:

"I thought the green jug was for us...it didn't taste any different! And jeez – I'm old enough anyway for one drink..."

But Rob will not be moved. Eric is sentenced to miss Boxing Day shopping with his friends tomorrow. Luke finishes his second drink in a hurry, knowing it's only a matter of time before word gets around and suspicion falls on him as well.

In the other room, Jenny is sent to bed despite her half-hearted protests ("It's after eleven, young lady!"). She's feeling a little hot, and kind of funny, but tired as well, so she foregoes the tantrums of years past and heads upstairs with alcohol on her breath, unbeknownst to her parents.

Red cheeks and warm grins, raised glasses and a second chorus of Christmas carols round out the evening.

It is no surprise that the family, as the primary locus of socialization and the transmission of cultural values, should be an important consideration for the study of how youth learn to drink. It is common for one's first exposure to alcohol experiences to occur within the context of the family (Barnes, 1990, 137), whatever form this exposure may take. Indeed, many people are offered their first alcoholic beverage at home under the supervision of a parent or older family member, a custom that may have implications for their future relationship to liquor. For instance, one study has reported that youth who were allowed to have a drink at home by the time they reached the 5th grade were more likely by the 7th grade to report recent use (Jackson, Henriksen & Dikinson, 1999). It is not clear, however, whether the drinking recorded by the students once they'd reached 7th grade was also in the home, or if they were simply more likely to have commenced drinking with their peers if they'd first been introduced to liquor by the family. In any case, this study certainly begs the question as to whether introducing adolescents to alcohol at home renders them more likely to drink more and sooner than those who receive no exposure in the context of the family. After all, the values, norms, and attitudes absorbed by youth must certainly affect their relationship to alcohol (Rivers, 1994, 156), given the importance of personal meaning to decisions about drinking. It has been suggested that the inclusion of alcohol into family lifestyle with meals or "as a relaxant" encourages both its use and "the association of alcohol use with sociability and conviviality" (Bank et al., 1985, 166). One group of authors (Jackson et al., 1999) articulates this perspective in no uncertain terms:

> Being allowed a drink of one's own is an experience that has a strong behavioural component (i.e., the child practices the behaviour of drinking alcohol) and a strong normative component (i.e., this behaviour is sanctioned by parents). It is not surprising that an experience having these

> components was a strong predictor of children's alcohol-related risk status, and that such an experience was substantially more important than parental communication and parental rule setting in determining children's risk of alcohol use. (366)

Jackson and colleagues are certainly correct that this practice seems to promote the acceptability of an adolescent drinking underage, but their strong wording (note the preoccupation with "risk") occludes the other implications of their findings, namely that if drinking at home is a learning experience, then there is the potential to learn "positive" drinking habits as well. Thus, the practice of drinking moderately, which many parents hope to impart to their children, may be modelled even as drinking underage is permitted or encouraged, at least in this limited setting. There is even some indication that those introduced to liquor with parental consent have fewer behavioural complications as a result of subsequent consumption (Rivers, 1994, 47). Clearly then, the manner in which alcohol is managed in the home carries the potential to impact subsequent consumption experiences for adolescents, for whom drinking under the supervision of family members may be a powerful formative event. The nature of this impact, however, no doubt resists simple, concise elucidation.

Adolescents' relationships with their parents are central to many theories of substance use among youth (Andrews, Hops & Duncan, 1997, 259). As youth observe their parents through the course of growing up, the latter become role models for how to drink, when to drink, and for what reasons (Barnes, 1990; Miller et al., 2000). Often, teens tend to imitate their conception of parents' drinking style, unless they perceive it as extreme (Harburg, Davis & Caplan, 1982, 147). Indeed, some have suggested that perceptions of parents' drinking are among the strongest influences on adolescent alcohol use, particularly for males (Wilks et al., 1989, Miller et al., 2000). This gender

qualification, however, should draw our attention to the deceptive simplicity of broad claims about parent-teen modelling. The relationship appears decidedly more complex as one examines the research more closely. For instance, Andrews and colleagues (1997) found that adolescents seem to model parental behaviour with respect to substance use only where there existed a good relationship between parent and child. They suggest two mechanisms through which this process operates: teens may imitate parents if they value them, or parents may encourage underage use in the context of a positive relationship. One could imagine others, however, such as a less-than-conscious reproduction of observed behaviour, irrespective of warmth or closeness between generations. It is significant, however, that interpersonal factors may complicate modelling within the family. Moreover, the study by Andrews and colleagues found that their findings were supported only for older boys and younger girls, illustrating that gender and age may further moderate parental influence. In fact, it is not only the gender of the teen that warrants attention, but of the parent as well; several studies have reported that a father's drinking behaviour may be a more important influence upon his children than a mother's (e.g., Andrews et al, 1997; Wilks et al., 1989). It seems clear, therefore, that parental modelling is by no means a simple transmission of values and behaviours from one generation to the next, but rather a complex process subject to a number of intermediate variables. Quite frankly, literature to date has been unable to address this phenomenon with sufficient precision to detail empirically how modelling proceeds differently for youth in different contexts. Perhaps this is why some researchers have found parental modelling to have no effect on concurrent use by youth (e.g., Ary et al., 1983), and why there seems to be some uncertainty as to the relationship between parental and adolescent

drinking behaviours (Stephenson & Henry, 1996, 61, as quoted above). Further exploration seems prudent.

Hide and Seek

Parental influence upon underage drinking is certainly not limited to modelling, as there are a number of more direct ways that parents affect the consumption habits of their children. The most straightforward of these is financial; adolescents are of course fiscally dependent on their family, and so money used to purchase alcohol frequently tends to come directly from parents, who may or may not oppose their child's drinking (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 93). Older teens often seek employment as a means to expand and secure their cash flow, yet even these ventures are commonly dependent upon parents to provide transportation, appropriate clothing, and permission. Additionally, "individuals may drink because they perceive that their parents expect them to drink" before they reach the age of majority (Cox, 1990, 242), thus parental expectations and/or support become salient. Availability is a significant concern as well, as "obtaining alcohol from parents' supply or having someone older purchase it [are] both more common that self-purchasing" (Smart et al., 1996, 423). Thus, alcohol may be more likely to be available in households where parents themselves drink or maintain a supply within the house (Miller et al., 2000, 21-22), and where adults directly facilitate their children's consumption, deliberately circumventing legal age restrictions "because they see it absurd to disallow" this behaviour (Shaw, 2002, 10). Parenting can therefore impact the drinking habits of youth in some very simple, predictable ways, through control over availability, purchasing power, and overt encouragement or discouragement.

The management of knowledge within the family is important as well when it comes to the issue of underage drinking. Jackson and colleagues (1999) reported, for instance, that "children who believed their parents would not know if they were drinking alcohol had 2.6 times the odds of reporting recent alcohol use at follow-up" (Jackson et al., 1999, 365). It seems, then, that perceptions of parental supervision and discipline are linked to drinking decisions, at least in cases where parents are believed to oppose underage use (Jackson et al., 1999). A mother's or father's knowledge of drinking activity, then, is certainly a relevant concern for many youth, as it often entails discipline or disapproval. However, at least one study has reported that parents demonstrate a significant lack of awareness of the extent of drinking underage (Beck, Scaffa, Swift & Ko, 1995). In part, this tendency probably reflects a common "parental strategy of not questioning too closely" about alcohol and drug use among their children (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, 194): "although most parents are concerned about underage drinking, many may fail to monitor and supervise their teens effectively" (Beck & Treiman, 1996, 634). In addition, most of this behaviour occurs "in a context where parents are not present" (Beck et al., 1995, 330). Often, drinking is overlooked, ignored or tolerated because it is seen as normal, or as much less serious than use of other illicit substances of intoxication (Roth & Friedman, 1990, 185). Thus, while most parents in the (1995) study by Beck and colleagues forbid teenage drinking in their own home, they seem to have accepted that youth will drink elsewhere, and "less than half (46%) said they would prohibit their teens from going to a party where alcohol will be served" (331). Interestingly, this study also evidenced not only ignorance but also denial among parents as to their own children's participation in drinking and impaired driving. There seems,

therefore, to be a curious tendency among parents to wilfully avoid knowledge of adolescent drinking, even though it appears that their active surveillance and involvement can play a role in limiting this behaviour, which most parents regard as problematic (Beck et al., 1995, 330). What is at stake, then, are the implications when parents are confronted with knowledge that they feel they must act upon.

Family Matters

Everyone in the living room froze as Brenda Patterson swung open the door, home three hours early, still smiling at the stroke of luck that caused a computer network failure at the office. The smile vanished instantly, not to be seen again that day. Her son Mitchell and his friends were frozen, caught in the act, panic in their eyes as she slowly registered the beer bottles on the coffee table. She was momentarily speechless. They were drinking – *drinking*! Who – where did they – what the – *thirteen* year-olds, *drinking* in her living room in the middle of the afternoon!

"Just what is going on here, boys?" her voice is strained, livid, lethal. There's a short, desperate silence, followed by the predictable, maddening response, offered at little more than a whisper:

"Nothin."

"Nothing? *Nothing?!* That's it – I want everyone out of here *right now*! Mitchell, take a good look, because it will be a *long* time before you see *anyone* again...wait, what's that smell?" Two of the boys, Ronnie and Chris, had just started their bolt to the door when Brenda's upraised hand froze them

in their tracks. Tyler, on the other hand, had remained apart from the other three, standing by the open window with a freshly lit joint held behind his back. He thought briefly about quietly stubbing it out on the wall behind him, but by then it was too late – Mrs. Patterson's eyes had already locked onto the thin coil of smoke that had so quickly spread the smell throughout the room.

"Is that what I think it is?" Brenda's gaze scorched the room, finding lowered eyes and hunched shoulders. Figuring that he was busted anyway, Tyler gave a little shrug and, in a moment of wild insolence he would soon regret, took a small drag, cringing slightly as he did so.

"Wh – you give me that *right now*, you little sonofa – everyone SIT DOWN! We're gonna call all your parents...no, Mitchell, you park it, mister! You can go to your room when *I* say so, *after* we do this. Alright boys, I want phone numbers, and I want them now!"

And so. Mitchell was pinned down, forced to endure an interminable, teeth-grinding, hot-cheeked period of wrath and mortification before being banished to his room to await the inevitable confrontation. There was very little to think about, lying on his bed in the dark, except his impending doom. It was impossible to think about anything else. Eventually, the sound of the door opening announced his father's arrival, after which there was a surprisingly long muffled conversation downstairs, and finally footsteps in the hall and a heavy knock on his door. They entered, stone-faced, without waiting for an answer, and he decided he might as well stay reclined,

propped up on one elbow and doing his best to avoid looking either one of them in the eye.

"Mitchell, did you have any of that boy's marijuana?" his mother began the interrogation in a low, stern tone. He shook his head, still looking down and away, knowing that he would've if he'd had the chance that afternoon.

"We need you to be honest with us, Mitchell. Have you ever tried that stuff before?" Another mute headshake. "Drugs are really bad, really serious, don't you know that? We've told you that before!" They hadn't, actually, but Mitchell wasn't about to correct her. Besides, he knew people who smoked pot all the time and still did fine in school. His mother sighed in the face of his silence. "We just...we're really worried about you now...we don't want to see you ruin your life with this kind of stuff."

They seemed to be waiting for an answer of some sort, but what response could he give? He said nothing. After a tense moment, his father spoke for the first time.

"Mitchell, I want you to promise me right now that you won't go near that stuff again, you understand me?" The news was still newer for his father, and so he was still angry. Mitchell nodded, of course, but that only seemed to enrage the man, who promptly cuffed him in the back of the head. "That's not good enough, mister! Now you look at me and I wanna hear you swear you won't do drugs."

"I promise." the pain in his head made it come out more sullen than sincere.

"I mean it, kiddo. Do you have any idea how stupid this was? Jesus! And drinking beer – what the heck were you thinking?"

"You're too young for that, Mitchell. Whose idea was it to start drinking anyway?" Mitchell shrugged, hoping his mom's question would pass. But his father just cuffed him again.

"You answer your mother! Whose idea was this? Was it that Tyler kid with the drugs?"

"I dunno. I guess so." A lie, but an easy one to sell.

"I thought so. Look, we don't want you hanging around that kid any more, alright?"

"But he's in my class! What am I supposed – "

"I don't give a damn! You're not to spend any time with that boy, understand?"

"Whatever. Fine."

"And I *will* be checking with your teacher to make sure you don't."

"What? You can't just – "

"End of discussion, mister. We'll be back in a little while to discuss your punishment."

"You are never, ever to pull something like this again. Understand?"

"Yeah, yeah." As they left the room, Mitchell was shocked – it was the first time *they'd* ever slammed his door.

The structure and character of the family are considerations of consequence for an analysis of the social context for underage drinking. The nature and quality of family relationships can play an important role in shaping the relationship of an adolescent to alcohol (Barnes, 1990, 148). For instance, good communication patterns between parent and child appear to be correlated with lower levels of consumption (Guilamo-Ramos, Turrisi, Jaccard, Wood & Gonzalez, 2004; Kafka & London, 1991). Strong communication may inhibit drinking for adolescents due to the role of parents as moral authorities who often disapprove of (or are perceived to disapprove of) such behaviour (Kafka & London, 1991). Similarly, warm affective relationships between parents and their teens seem to be associated with less alcohol use by the teens and fewer problems accompanying use (Guilamo-Ramos, 2004, 499). In contrast, hostile parenting styles (as characterized by nagging, inconsistent rule enforcement, threats and anger) may be related to a greater tendency among adolescents to drink to intoxication (Haans & Hotton, 2004). The direction of this relationship remains to be determined, but we should consider that perhaps this is another example of bi-directional influence within the family. In addition to hostile parenting, familial discord and adolescent detachment from the family appear to be related to higher levels of use, and conflict and alienation within the family may lead to drinking as an outlet to cope with stress (Bray et al., 2000, 595). Research in this vein is also congruent with findings that the perceived supportiveness of the family is associated with subsequent drinking habits. Mason and Windle (2001) have shown empirically that youth who report more supportive family environments tend to associate more with non-drinking friends, begin drinking later in life, and drink less during adolescence. Similarly, family hardiness (as measured

by the perceptions of teens that their families manage stress by working together toward common goals in an action-oriented manner) appears to provide a buffer against the possibility of problems with underage drinking – though in this case as well there is some uncertainty as to the direction of the relationship (Stephenson & Henry, 1996). Interestingly, the prevalence of family routines, the quantity of time spent together as a family, and an adolescent's satisfaction with life at home have been found to be unrelated to alcohol consumption (Stephenson & Henry, 1996). It seems clear, however, the structure of the family matters; adolescent drinking and family dynamics seem to be mutually influential – and understandably so, given the powerful potential for change and conflict represented by the intrusion of underage alcohol use into family affairs. Drinking underage does not have a simple role as either cause or product of family relationships, but rather entwines in a number of ways with the structure and situation of family life.

Others to Look Up To

Any analysis of family impact upon adolescent drinking would be remiss to focus solely upon relationships between parent and child, as brothers and sisters can play a significant role in dynamics within the home as well. Older siblings, in particular, tend to be exclusively focused upon in academic literature (e.g., Needle et al., 1986; Windle, 2000). Perhaps the absence of data on younger siblings is reflective of the perception that they have no influence over the drinking habits of their older brothers and sisters, and perhaps this is accurate – but it is also possible that there will be insights uncovered in this area as well, as research advances. In any case, there seems to be some agreement

among researchers that elder siblings are an important element to consider. Their substance use, for instance, is correlated with the levels of use reported by their younger siblings (Miller et al., 2000; Needle et al., 1986). This relationship can be explained in part by the fact that older siblings may provide greater ease of access to alcohol for their younger counterparts, especially in cases where they are old enough to legally purchase it (Needle et al., 1986; Windle, 2000). Exposure to the behaviour and peers of elder siblings may lead to earlier association with social substance use for adolescents (Windle, 2000). Moreover, siblings seem to influence the coping styles of teens, who may learn from their older brother or sister that drinking is an acceptable method of dealing with stressful life events (Windle, 2000). Indeed, elder siblings can provide ample opportunities to model a particular relationship to alcohol and drinking, and thus can be a significant source of influence (Ary et al., 1993). In fact, one study has even reported that they are more important role models than parents for drinking behaviour (Needle et al., 1986). In short, it seems that "older siblings constitute a separate, important, and additional reference group for younger siblings that influences substance use behaviour," including abstinence (Needle et al., 1986). Therefore, although the role of older siblings is in some ways an indirect influence of the parents, who've raised these children as well (Ary et al., 1993), their position within the family hierarchy seems to permit them a unique relationship with their younger brothers and sisters that has the potential to powerfully impact drinking decisions. They may act as peers or parental role models, yet they need not be bound by the social parameters of either role. Certainly older siblings have the potential to shape the knowledge and reception of underage drinking within the family as well, a fact that adds to the complexity of the issue of alcohol within the home.

Above all, then, it seems that elder brothers and sisters further complicate the picture of family influence, as children of the same parents who have confronted many of the same issues with respect to alcohol within the home.

Epilogue

This has been an exploration; a concerted attempt to delineate and interrogate different facets of the phenomenon of underage drinking. Eschewing causality and clear, uncluttered generalizations about youth and their behaviour, this project stands as distinct from the field of research that nevertheless provides the empirical and theoretical foundation for its insights. Through a process of synergy, evaluation and extension of the thoughts, ideas and data found in this field, the present work approaches adolescent drinking as a dense, complex and interconnected milieu that provokes little in the way of certainty. This inquiry has provoked a range of probing questions with answers that are necessarily limited, partial, and subject to qualification. Nevertheless, I have been striving in these pages toward new insights, and a new perspective on this phenomenon that seeks to integrate and interrogate a vast array of empirical and theoretical claims. Thus, the success of this endeavour is not dependent on the production of tidy, succinct formulations to be applied to adolescents everywhere, but rather upon its engagement of ambiguity, complexity and interconnection so as to light new avenues for thought and study.

The metaphor of *valences*, for which I am indebted to Kafka and London (1991), occurs to me again as I begin to think summatively about the fruits of my labour; it seems an elegant, supple formulation for conceptualizing the interconnections, tensions and ambiguities that have been the focus of this work. This metaphor strikes me as especially appropriate because it deals with the *relative* and *potential* ability of different elements in different contexts to react to, interact with, and affect one another. This is, I believe, a

useful formulation for the myriad of factors that contribute to the experience of drinking underage.

Some of the most basic and fundamental elements of my project revolve around notions of alcohol and drinking themselves. On a theoretical level, I have attempted to problematize notions of what youth and adults "know" about alcohol and drinking, arguing that knowledge and meaning are negotiated, contextual, and contingent. In this sense, meanings and ideas about alcohol are the site of conflicting interpretation and representation, producing ambiguities and tensions – particularly in the context of adolescence – that may be navigated by youth in many ways. Indeed, issues of meaning and interpretation, such as those surrounding perceived risks and positives of drinking, are subject to selective, variable emphasis; they are as valences in a charged environment. Drunkenness and intoxication have similarly ambiguous implications for adolescents, and the role of alcohol is revealed as polyvalent, chimerical. Nevertheless, I have tried to elucidate some of the factors at stake in a departure from sobriety as it pertains to boundaries of the self and of self-expression, identity and control, as well as the relationships of drinkers to one another, and to the sober everyday world.

Adolescence and cultural constructions thereof are a pivotal backdrop for this shifting mass of meanings, interpretations and ambiguities. Adolescence itself comprises a broader context in which conceptions of underage consumption are negotiated, though this context also complicates the picture, and adds further valences among the elements at play. The schizophrenic imperatives of adolescence seem strangely congruent with our dissonant and even paradoxical cultural treatment of alcohol, drinking and drunkenness in North America. Stranded in transition between child and adult, teens are prohibited from

drinking even as they are propelled toward the personal, social and developmental positives it seems to represent. Preoccupied with the immanent world of adolescence, these youth are driven by the tensions at its core, which exacerbate the difficulties inherent in reconciling alcohol as both virtue and vice, tool and threat.

Peer groups and peer relationships perhaps enact the metaphor of valences most directly, as the relationships between adolescents illustrate the variable, situational potential for one to affect or be affected by another. Indeed, this tension between the agency of adolescents to actively contribute to who they are becoming and the influence of others upon them is not one that is amenable to easy resolution. I have endeavoured to highlight the texture and dynamism of peer interactions in an attempt to explore the implications of this tension as it pertains to drinking behaviour. The possible impacts are multiple, and contingent. Family, too, presents a dilemma with respect to influence, and not only in terms of the quantity or specific mechanisms of influence that familial relationships bring to bear upon this issue. The family entails a number of overt factors relevant to underage drinking, such as discipline, stability, communication, consent or opposition of drinking, surveillance, and particular shared events or experiences. However, there are also a number of more subtle considerations for understanding the role of the family unit, such as learned behaviour, expectations regarding drinking, modelling, and availability of alcohol. Moreover, these valences co-exist with those that emerge from peer interactions, further complicating the context in which adolescents confront decisions about drinking.

And so, there emerges a troubling question: how much of this texture, this ambiguity and tension, can be constructively incorporated within the bounds of rigorous

academic study? It seems that an approach such as my own might be designed to confound, complicate or undermine the empirically-based assertions and insights expressed by studies in the field to no constructive purpose – but this has never been my intent. Instead, I have endeavoured to enrich the theoretical underpinnings of this research, understanding that this may involve taking a step back from the level of the measurable and the empirical, and an attempt to approach the issue from a novel angle. I confess that I am ultimately uncertain as to what degree the insights gleaned from this explorative undertaking will compliment or confound the methods and conceptual frameworks brought to bear within the field of study. I do hope that I am able to do both, in fact. If nothing else, however, I have been striving to elucidate avenues for future research to pursue in greater depth and detail.

It is clear that we as researchers must be suspicious of studies that make sweeping, sure or superlative claims about underage drinking on the basis of a narrow range of empirical data. Indeed, empirical studies in this field have a long way to go in order to adequately articulate the ways in which drinking impacts the lives of youth, and vice versa. Developmental implications, for instance, as well as more detailed, comprehensive accounts of the effects of gender on the personal and social machinations related to underage drinking, would be fruitful sites for further inquiry. But so, too, are the valences through which underage drinking is constituted and re-constituted, and the interactions between these sites of meaning and influence. Having completed this project, it is my belief that one of the ways in which the work that I have started could be furthered and enhanced is to expand the focus of this approach beyond the auto-biographical. Through qualitative interviews, or soliciting others' narrative accounts of

their own experiences underage, the limits imposed on this work by its grounding in my own experience could be surpassed. In this way, the inherent diversity of adolescents, adolescent perspectives, and underage drinking experiences could be engaged more fully, with the result of enriching and expanding the insights of the present project.

In the meantime, we must continue to question, always keeping in mind that the phenomenon of adolescent alcohol use offers little in the way of easy answers. We must seek to confront it as adolescents themselves do, as a messy and volatile, yet intriguing and exciting element of their social experience.

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